

SEASON ONE

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Encounter at Farpoint"



By [Zack Handlen](#)

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Let's start with the bridge. In the original series, it looked like a cabin on a ship. A large ship, sure, some kind of battle cruiser or a luxury liner, but still identifiably nautical, with curved display panels, the hard angles, the way everything essentially worked to support the single central point of the captain's chair. It wasn't easy on the eyes, but it was functional. It was here to get the job *done*.

Now look at the bridge of this new *Enterprise*, and it's... different. It's different, right? The captain's chair is still in the middle, but he's flanked on either side by seats for his officers, and the majority of the heavy duty computer equipment is up a rise *behind* the captain's chair. He can't look to his right and converse with his science officer from a seated position. In fact, if he wants to talk to any of the people standing at the back wall, the captain has to stand up. The helmsmen are in the traditional down-front position, but they look half a mile away. While the bridge on *TOS* revolves around the captain, this new bridge is more an environment full of tools which the captain has to

draw from. The original bridge is designed for a man who dives into a situation, phaser on stun, two-fisted and grinning. This new bridge is for the strategist. It may take him twenty minutes to plan his next move, but you probably shouldn't get too attached to your king.

(A quick aside: the first season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is a bumpy, bumpy ride. When a show runs as long as this one, and when it hits the heights *Next Gen* [from here on referred to under the approved abbreviation, *TNG*] eventually does, it's easy to focus on the great moments and ignore the awful ones. In the weeks to come, I expect I'll be reminding myself over and over of the Borg and the totally bad-ass time loop episodes and Locutus and the fact that Tasha Yar eventually dies. But we can't just skip ahead. We're nerds, for god's sake, and some things, like continuity and completism, are sacred.)

The *TNG* bridge is important, because it indicates a difference of intention that gives the show its own identity even in the early, rougher seasons. If the bridge of the *TNG Enterprise* is more contemplative by design, it makes sense that it is also more democratized. On the original show, the major focus was Kirk, Spock, and McCoy, in that order. Lip service was paid to the ship's more than four hundred souls, and a handful of other supporting characters caught our attention from time to time, but there was never any question of who ran the place, and who really mattered. Uhura and Sulu and the rest were part of that stable of faces whose development relied more on the needs of the episode than on any inherent integrity of their personality. So Sulu could be a botanist one episode, because a writer wanted to show off some fake space plants, and it never gets mentioned again.

TNG changed that. While there are still definite leading figures, the difference between lead and support is a lot fuzzier, and right from the start, you get a sense that these people have lives even when they aren't on camera. I'm not suggesting those lives are richly developed or particularly complex right now, and I'll freely admit, if I didn't know how much better the show got down the road, I'd be a lot less excited at the prospect of hanging out with these people. But even without advanced knowledge, there is *potential* here. The drama of the show isn't just going to come from alien threats and space-time anomalies. We're also going to have to deal with a crew that has its own fair share of needs, ambition, and suffering.

So we have: Geordi La Forge (Levar Burton), a blind man with a special visor that allows him to "see," at the cost of constant pain; First Officer William Riker (Jonathan Frakes) and Counselor Deanna Troi (Marina Sirtis), former lovers meeting again and re-opening old wounds; Doctor Beverly Crusher (Gates McFadden), with a dead husband and an irritatingly chipper son, Wesley (Wil Wheaton); Worf (Michael Dorn), a Klingon and a Starfleet officer; Tasha Yar (Denise Crosby), who has some serious issues with her past; Data (Brent Spiner), an android who wants nothing more than to be a real live boy; and Captain Jean Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart) an irritable bald man who dislikes children. Of such humble beginnings, dynasties are built. Not all these subplots are immediately promising, but introducing them this early on is a show of good faith, an implication of a cohesive community which only needs our attention and time to grow.

The downside to all this is that "Farpoint" has a number of scenes whose only reason for existing is to give us exposition that doesn't immediately matter. At an hour and a half, the show's pilot episode is basically a two-parter, and while it's necessary to spend time introducing us to this new world, there's a lack of urgency that occasionally makes the episode less an adventure than a homework assignment. The episode starts strongly enough, with the *Enterprise* running afoul of Q (John de Lancie), a god-like being who demands the ship stop its explorations because of humanity's essential savageness. This leads to lots of shouting, running around, showing off the new special effects, and while it's rather silly in retrospect (why would Q stop them while they were on their way to Farpoint? They haven't yet gone beyond the limits of Federation knowledge), it's familiar and exciting enough to work as a hook.

But then we get the saucer separation, a long, rather pointless sequence that only exists because it kind of looks cool. Once the ship arrives at Deneb IV, home of the unusual Farpoint base, whatever urgency remained evaporates. Q gives Picard a deadline, and a mission, and the real story behind Farpoint is clever, but the mystery is treated with the same importance as introducing Riker to his new captain (Picard has Riker manually re-connect the ship's body and saucer sections, a not all that tense scene that simply repeats what we saw ten minutes ago, in reverse), setting up the Crushers, showing off the Holodeck, and so on. While "Where No Man Has Gone Before," the first episode of the original series, kept raising the stakes with its major threat, the danger in "Farpoint" is only really relevant

when Q is on-screen, and even then, it's not all that nerve-wracking, especially when Q starts giving orders at the climax which guide Picard into making the right choice. General rule of thumb: when an impish being of immense power starts encouraging you to do something, it's a good idea to do the opposite.

As beginnings go, this is more functional than inspiring, and there are already harbingers of problems we'll have to face in the episodes to come. Yes, Wesley is as annoying as promised. Tasha Yar is one note and tedious. Denise Crosby isn't given a whole lot to do in the role, but surely she could've found some other setting beyond "overwrought shouting." Marina Sirtis doesn't fare much better. Troi's importance as ship counselor is questionable from the start, as her half-Betazoid ability to sense emotion allows her to say things like "I sense a powerful mind" whole seconds before the *Enterprise* goes into Red Alert. I always wondered if the show wouldn't've been better off revealing in some later season that Troi's "gift" was nothing more than the instincts and intuition of an extremely clever con-woman. This would explain how, despite having spent her entire life experiencing the feelings of everyone around her, Troi is more vulnerable to the passions of strangers than a normal person. (You'd think she would've developed some kind of protective distance. I don't imagine therapy would be very helpful if your therapist started crying before you did.)

There's the expected clumsiness of actors trying on new roles, some really painful music cues, and a pacing that suffers from the occasional stutter. The score manages to make DeForest Kelley's cameo appearance more mawkish than it should've been, and stutter-wise, there's a thirty second shot of Engineering that has nothing to do with anything. Sure, it looks cool, but we'd already seen the area at the start of the episode, we trust that it hasn't moved. I could've done without the corny reminders of Troi and Riker's long-buried love, and the central question of humanity's potential for growth has been done so often that it barely even registers anymore.

There are bright spots, though, even excluding hindsight. Patrick Stewart is a damn fine actor. His initial take on Picard is a little off-putting, stressing his temper and authoritarian ways over the intelligence and charisma he would later bring to the part, but even so, he does strong work. I especially enjoyed his encounter with Beverly and Wesley on the bridge. It's not a great scene, but Stewart (and, to give her credit, McFadden) makes it work. Data is overly smug, and Brent Spiner occasionally smiles (which doesn't work at all), but the character is striking, and

leaves more of an impression than, say, Riker's genial blandness. Story-wise, while Q's ethical probing doesn't leave an impression, the resolution of the Farpoint crisis does, proving in a believable way that Picard and his team really are ready to face whatever challenges lie before them.

In the weeks ahead, we'll be plumbing the depths of *TNG*, so expect all manner of cheap shots and sarcasm. I'll be drinking heavily and when I drink, I get mean. No matter how bad it gets, though, there's a bright future ahead, and even at its worst, we know these characters are capable of more. I needed the chemistry of Kirk, Spock, and McCoy to get me through the roughest patches of season three, and now I have a whole ship full of people to depend on. Watching "Farpoint," I enjoyed myself regardless of the episode's quality because these are familiar faces. I grew up with this cast, this design, and even when the series hits rock bottom, I have that to hold on to. So strap in, settle back, visor in place, aaaaand--*engage*.

Stray Observations:

- We'll be seeing Q again, but I would be remiss if I didn't mention how much I always enjoy John de Lancie's performance. Q is the end of the line for god-like beings, and despite the silly costumes and accents he's forced to wear in "Farpoint," de Lancie makes it work. He and Stewart play off each other very well.
- Kind of got caught up in everything, so in case you were wondering: the Farpoint station is actually an alien creature forced to build itself into a base. The creature's mate shows up, fires on the planet, and Picard realizes what's going and helps free the trapped creature, thus proving to Q's satisfaction that the *Enterprise* is mature enough to explore further into the galaxy.
- Good to see the Rule of Three is still in effect. (Whenever a character in a future society lists past events, they always mention two true things, one made-up, in that order.) Q starts off as a ship captain, then becomes a World War II officer, and finally a soldier wearing what looks like a suit made of gym mats. Do they ever mention the "military controlled by drugs" mythos again?

- Spiner's Data smile is *so* creepy. I can't help wondering if his facial expression inspired the creation of Lore.
- Speaking of threes, given the amazing number of *TNG* episodes, I'm switching over to a new format and doing three episodes per entry instead of the usual two. In this way, I hope to get to the end of the series before the heat death of the universe. So, next week, look for "The Naked Now," "Code of Honor," and "The Last Outpost."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Naked Now"/"Code of Honor"/"The Last Outpost"



By [Zack Handlen](#)

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Here is a nice thing I can say, because that is how Mother raised me: the title sequence of *TNG* is my favorite of any iteration of the franchise. Partly it's the whirling planets, partly it's Patrick Stewart's sonorous delivery of the opening monologue (now subtly changed from "No man" to "No *one*"), but mostly, it's Jerry Goldsmith's theme music. I prefer it to the theme from *TOS*. I still get goosebumps some times, because *that* is what *Star Trek* should sound like. Stirring and rich and full of adventure, and it always puts me in a good mode.

Here's the rest: that good mood didn't last long for any of these episodes. I'm still trying to decide the best way to handle three per week, and I may eventually go back to my long essay format, but for now, let's try and choke down the misery in bite-sized chunks.

"The Naked Now"

It's funny, I used to think "The Naked Time," an early episode in the first season of *TOS*, had a dumb title, but "Naked Now" wins out. You can give the writers credit for immediately reinforcing the new series' connections with the old, creating a stronger sense of continuity between the two and, in theory, letting some of the excellence of "Time" (which I gave an A) rub off, but in practice, the characters are still too rough, and the plotting far, far too loose for the comparison to do *TNG* any favors. This is a mess, and what's almost fascinating enough to be entertaining is how thorough a mess it is. We're not just talking about bad jokes, or weak plotting, or clumsy performances, or misjudged tone. We're talk about *all* of those problems, combining to create an ungainly, clunking forty-five minutes of television. After watching this, I'm amazed the show lasted seven seasons. Hell, I'm amazed it lasted a month.

The *Enterprise* is investigating problems on a research vessel near a collapsing star--and it's funny how we're already resorting to the same tropes of the original. The "troubled science team" is such a *Trek* standard at this point that you wonder if script-writers aren't handed out a series of Mad-Libs at the start of the planning process: here's "TST," here's "God-like being," here's "planet which has evolved into an exact duplicate of some location and time in Earth's history." But familiarity isn't the issue here. Riker and an away team beam over to the science vessel to find the crew dead, and the whole ship in chaos and disrepair. (It's funny how quickly Riker assumes the entire crew is dead after some bodies are discovered. Nobody's even done a headcount yet.) Dr. Crusher insists on full quarantine procedure when the teams back, including a transporter scrub, but while her precaution is well-advised, it doesn't do any good. Soon Geordi is babbling about how much he wants to see beyond the limits of his visor, and it's not long before he manages to spread his sickness, a sickness that the Sick Bay computers don't recognize at all, to the rest of the crew.

The progression here is roughly equivalent to the *TOS* episode, and that's an issue, not so much for going over the same ground as for how much illogic and laziness is required to make retracing the steps possible. Crusher pays lip service to procedure, but security in Sick Bay is hilariously lax; despite Geordi's clearly disturbed mind, and despite the fact that the science expedition team died because *their* minds were disturbed, Geordi is able to wander out of the Bay as soon as the doctor's back is turned. (He immediately goes to see Wesley, and that leads to, well, we'll get

to it.) Then there's the fact that the original *Enterprise* recorded their encounter with this particular "disease," but it's Riker who ends up making the connection between the two and not the computer system, despite the clear and obvious relationship. I don't expect the computers to do all the thinking, but surely a search for "rapidly spreading lowered inhibitions, dead crew" would've yielded some results. And then, even once the connection is made and Beverly prepares McCoy's cure, it's another twenty minutes episode-time before she tries it out on anyone, allowing the sickness to take over most of the ship. Once she does test the cure it doesn't work, so she has to prepare a new iteration, which is a valid, if uninspired, way to drag out the threat. But why did it take so long to make that first test? Maybe she was hoping Wesley would get sick and beam himself into the star.

Oh no, wait, that was me. I want to stress, my complaints about the Crusher brat are not directed at Wil Wheaton; true, he doesn't give the best performance, but he was young, and as written, the role is already indefensible. So, so indefensible. I was lucky enough to start watching *TNG* regularly only in the third season, so I think I missed most of his worst moments. (Either that, or I was young enough to like them.) But he's terrifying to me now, with his needy, grinning desperation to be noticed. In "Now," he builds a magical levitating device that he uses to lift chairs, then take over engineering, then save the ship, and even though the results are positive, I still don't trust him. I mean, sweet Jeebus, he has a machine that he uses to simulate Picard giving him orders. I can only imagine what those orders turn into, late at night, after Mom goes to bed. (Actually, now I'm wondering if Beverly might not borrow the toy for herself on occasion.)

Sorry! Twisted state of mind, but that's what this episode did to me. Even overlooking Wesley's twerpitude, there's still a whole cast of actors willing and able to embarrass themselves for "laughs." Tasha Yar's assault on my senses continues, as first she gets sick, then she gets horny, and then she has sex with Data, a colossally misjudged scene that threatens to derail the android's presence on the show before he can really establish himself. (Go ahead and enjoy your "fully functional" jokes this week. I say we follow Tasha's advice in the future, and pretend this never happened.) Even on his own, Data isn't much fun. Whenever Spinner shows emotion "in character," it comes off as oddly smug, and unlike Spock (to whom Data is probably the closest analog on *TNG*, due to his outsider status and

disconnect from human emotion), Data needs to be humble to be likable. Smarmy Data just makes you yearn for an off switch.

Not everybody does poorly. While Picard and Beverly's flirtation is pretty damn ridiculous, both actors are strong enough that it isn't that horrible to watch. Picard hasn't come entirely into focus yet, but Stewart is so good that this haziness seems intentional and intriguing, and McFadden proves herself again to be thoroughly reliable. And you know who surprised the hell out of me? Riker. I'm understanding his "Kirkness" more and more, as he's the only person on the *Enterprise* who manages to resist the disease out his sense of duty. (Both Picard and Crusher get their jobs done, but they also visibly succumb to the lower inhibitions.) In an episode as misbegotten as "Now" is, you have to cling to whatever sanity presents itself.

Grade: D-

"Code Of Honor"

This is the kind of episode that bored me as a kid. I wanted to see weird aliens and science fiction craziness, not politics and negotiation and debate. Sure, there are otherworldly trappings, but mostly this is just about how people work off each other, and how Picard has to balance the needs of his crew against the needs of Starfleet, and the obligation of the Prime Directive. That would've bored me growing up, and, well, it doesn't exactly fill me with glee now. But "Code" is better than "Naked Now," because it establishes a central storyline and delivers that story without falling into too many tedious traps. It's not good, and even "okay" is stretching, but at least you can see there's potential here, in some of the banter, and in the way the crew functions as a unit.

Ligon II doesn't play well with others. The people are proud, devoted to ritual, and quick to take offense at real or imagined insults. They're also, unless I missed an extra, uniformly black, which is a really dumb casting choice. The "Arabian Nights via the Massabesic High School Drama Club's costume closet" outfits are bad enough, I could've done without the racist vibe of a primitive civilization that treats women like chattel and likes kidnapping white ladies. It's unfortunate, then, that the *Enterprise* has to negotiate with them for a supply of a vaccine desperately needed by, well, you know the drill. The vaccine is the MacGuffin to get some Ligons on board the ship, to give

them a chance to kidnap Tasha Yar, and then to prevent Picard from simply beaming Yar back aboard and leaving. (He could also have left her behind. I'm just putting that out there.) It's not the most immediate of dangers, but it's ironclad enough.

Lutan, the head guy on Ligon II (or at least the part of Ligon II we see; *TNG* shares *TOS*'s willingness to pretend "the whole planet" translates to "the couple sets we could afford to dress"), takes a fancy to Yar's over-aggressive behavior and kidnaps her. Yeah, that happens. And as much as I'm not happy to have Yar as the focus of a storyline, at least it gets her out of the way for a few scenes. Picard's discussions with Riker and the others about the best way to proceed in a clearly touchy situation are non-ridiculous and give us a good sense of how the captain approaches the job: his word is final, but he's open to discussion. Plus, there's Riker's continued refusal to let Picard put himself in harm's way by joining an away team. Here, Riker is overruled because of politics, but it's a dramatically interesting change of pace to have such a clear delegation of responsibility. A good way to help establish characters early on in a show's run is to give them definable roles, so having Riker be Picard's bodyguard, so to speak, sets up a dynamic that has a lot of room to grow.

Once Picard beams down to Ligon, there's a lot of trickery around Lutan wanting to take Tasha for his "first," despite already having a perfectly good wife not ten feet away. The wife takes exception to this, challenges Tasha to a duel, and Picard has her accept. Again, that's some interesting politicking, because I can't imagine Kirk being so willing to risk a crew member's life. If it was a *TOS* episode, at the very least Kirk would've stepped in as Yar's "champion" or something. Picard and the others try and minimize Tasha's danger as much as possible (Picard has Data and Geordi beam down to check out the local weapon supply), but there's poison and pointy objects and this weird gym battleground that looks like it was taken off the *Gymkata* set, so there are no guarantees. Picard has a different set of priorities than Kirk, and a different approach to his duty. He doesn't need to throw himself into the battle to get the job done.

"Honor" is still not great: the Lignons are one note, and while the plot resolves itself satisfactorily (as opposed to "Now"'s "Oh, I guess we should stop now?"), with Lutan humiliated for his presumption and his wife scoring with some random dude, there's not a lot of emotional investment. Tasha's role in all this isn't as significant as you might

expect, but she still manages to grate, as Troi stresses that Yar is "attracted" to Lutan because he's strong and masculine and, I dunno, he has a shiny vest. This is a piece of character development that's tricky to pull off, because it goes against common sense, and making a supposedly powerful woman weak-kneed for a powerful man because he forced himself on her is hard to do without making the woman look unstable. That's what happens here, because Denise Crosby can't pull off the nearly impossible task of making sense out of the contradictory elements of her character. Yar has issues, but how do any of those issues connect? She talks about rape gangs in "Naked Now" (always a smart line to set up a sex scene), and clearly she's fought her way up the ranks to hold her current position. But you get no sense of steel from her, no personality beyond a whiny, petulant child who can also do arm flips. I appreciate having a stronger female presence on *TNG*, and Tasha is the only woman we have whose job isn't dependent on standard gender roles (everybody knows lady doctors, and Troi senses feeeeeelings, which is of course quite girly). She should've been amazing. Instead, the writers have to keep hamstringing her with insecurities which make no sense. (Far as I can tell, Beverly and Deanna don't spend much time complaining like a ten year old who can't go to a Justin Bieber concert.)(Wow, even *typing* that made me feel old.)

At least, we're getting a sense of this new crew as a team, as opposed to the disparate, hazy interactions of "Now." I'm not sure I'd believe a great show could come out of *TNG* after watching "Code," but I could at least say it had promise without sounding like a complete tool.

Grade: C-

"The Last Outpost"

This combines a couple things we saw on the original series (and I promise I'll stop bringing that up, eventually), the mysterious other alien race, and the mysterious technological doohickey left behind by a long extinct, incredibly powerful civilization. It has some strong elements, as the mystery surrounding the *Enterprise*'s apparent capture and build-to-reveal on the Ferengis make for good hooks. But the final wrap-up is disappointing, relying on easy moralizing and, to quote Bill Hicks, "back-slapping, 'Ain't humanity great' bullshit." The episode has a semi-god-like being, and it resorts to the sort of expediency that makes those creatures such lazy devices. Plus, the Ferengi

suck. Seriously, I know they'll get more interesting eventually (I remember liking Quark on *Deep Space Nine* quite a bit), but here, they're really, really terrible.

Before we find that out for certain, though, we know they're thieves, because they've stolen an energy converter. The *Enterprise* is in hot pursuit, but they're on shaky ground because they don't have immediate proof of the theft (at least, I assume that's why Picard is so leery of being overly aggressive), and because no one in the Federation has ever seen a Ferengi. This is similar to Kirk's initial dealings with the Romulans in "Balance of Terror," but I find it harder to believe the same trick the second time around. Everything we've seen of the new *Enterprise* is sleeker, more comfortable, more professional. The first ship looked like it was only some duct tape and solder away from falling apart. The new one is a mall with a warp drive. Because of this, I assume that the rest of Starfleet is equally advanced, and that dealings with alien races are more frequent. I assume there is an whole huge network out there of treaties and arrangements and councils, holding together the populace of galaxy in a thin web of civilization. There is no direct reason for me to assume this, sure, but the show's whole approach to space travel is enough to suggest this is less exploration than refinement, filling in the holes in maps. But even if you can't accept that, it does seem a little ridiculous that nobody's seen the Ferengi, not even to take a picture.

Of course, the Federation doesn't use money anymore, and the Ferengi are money grubbing bastards, so maybe that's why they've stayed in the shadows? In "Balance," the Romulans were mysterious because the last encounter between them and humans had resulted in a devastating war. Here, you could argue that the mystery race doesn't have anything to gain from contact, and they could be worried the Federation would try and regulate their greedy double-dealing. Whether or not that's the case though, it's hard to defend them in their first appearance. There are the expected jokes about physical appearance (on seeing Picard, a Ferengi says that humans are just as ugly as he'd heard, which is funny 'cause the *Ferengi* is the ugly one, eh? Eh?), but what's worse is that the creatures are cowardly and shameful. *TOS* nearly always gave its alien races some dignity, even if those races were defined largely by a single character trait. Here, though, the Ferengi are despicable, because they are capitalists, and capitalists are innate liars and thieves.

It's possible this is done satirically, but I'm noticing an undercurrent of "Humans RULE" to the series that I hadn't expected. The Ferengi are pathetic, and Picard has to constantly remind Worf to restrain his Klingon instincts, because mankind is clearly all about forethought and considered action. Both alien races we've met so far went out of their way to comment on how unusual it was to see Tasha Yar, a *woman*, in a position of authority. Then there's Data. If he *is* a Spock substitute, as mentioned above, how telling is it that, unlike Spock, Data's big goal in life is nothing more than becoming a person? Picard's defense of humanity in "Encounter at Farpoint" sounded reasonable, but perhaps it had a tinge of arrogance in retrospect.

After the *Enterprise* traps the Ferengi ship, it gets caught by some kind of tractor beam or energy, which Picard and his crew assume to be Ferengi-created. Again, we have the discussions about how best to proceed, and Picard's bluff once he contacts the Ferengi and realizes their mistake is smart and momentarily effective. I'm a grown-up now (relatively), and unlike my childhood self, I enjoy the tact and diplomacy that arises between two parties vying for the upper hand in an uncertain situation. I like the uncertainty of it. "Outpost" would've been a better episode if the Ferengi hadn't been so badly caricatured, and if it had stayed more with that tense feeling of walking through a minefield.

But no, this is the first season, so we've gotta have a dead civilization that leaves it's crazy old people on planets with toys of mind-boggling power. Riker beams down to the planet below the ships with an away team, as do the Ferengi, and if you thought the Ferengi were bad on the view screen, that's nothing to see them backstabbing here. There's a fight scene (the Ferengi have energy whips!), and then Portal, the guy running the device that's causing all the problems shows up. You think the name was something he was born with? Like his parents were really expecting a door, or a computer game. Anyway, he's demands Riker answers three questions, and asks about the wind-speed velocity of a sparrow, and Riker says, "African or European?" and Portal doesn't know and gets thrown off the bridge.

Sigh. No, instead it's a test about knowing when to fight, when to hold them, when to walk away, when to run--dammit! Portal quotes *The Art of War*, which conveniently enough, Riker and Picard were discussing earlier. So again we have a reminder that humanity is awesome and so forth. While the Ferengi cavort and whine and lie (if

you've seen the Mexican *Santa Claus*, these guys look like a gang of lizard-flavor Pitches), Riker and Portal pat each other on the back for their maturity, and go off to fight crime or do whatever it is moral superior beings do. I've got how long left of the first season? Hoo boy. I really hope it gets better from here.

Grade: C-

Stray Observations:

- Picard is to France what Chekov was to Russia. Sigh.
- Data's struggles with humor come up often on the show, and his attempt at telling Geordi a joke in "Code" was one of the episode's better character moments.
- We meet the head of Engineering in "Naked Now," and she is profoundly unmemorable.
- I'll hold off discussing the absurdities of the holodeck until we get to a holodeck-centered episode, but Tasha's fighting display for Lutan was a hoot.
- Example of a bad Data joke: he's defeated by a Chinese finger puzzle. Really? Really.

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Where No One Has Gone Before"/"Lonely Among Us"/"Justice"



By [Zack Handlen](#)

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"Where No One Has Gone Before"

This is a little better, thank goodness. The Wesley Factor is in effect, and the storyline is more interested in throwing out cool-sounding ideas than following through with any of them, but the cringe inducing cheesiness is kept to a minimum, and the tension increases as the episode progresses, rather than peaking early and then draining away to nothing. (I considered making a joke here about my sexual inadequacies, but then I remembered: I've been writing *Trek* recaps for about a year now. I don't think anyone is going to believe I'm having sex.) Most importantly, the tone is more or less on target. "The Last Outpost" tried to achieve a sense of mystery and awe, but largely failed; "No One," despite its imperfections, at least gives us an alien space that can't be handily defeated by the regurgitation of bumper sticker wisdom.

Starfleet has a new propulsion expert making the rounds, and Riker isn't happy to welcome him aboard the *Enterprise*. He's not convinced the expert is legit, despite the demonstrable improvement shown in at least two other ships. The real issue is that the data which Kosinski, the expert, sent over to prep the Enterprise engine doesn't make any sense. Chief Engineer Argyle is just as skeptical as Riker (I guess we should just assume Wesley inadvertently murdered the last Chief Engineer during one of his science projects?), and when Kosinski beams aboard, he does nothing to alleviate either men's concerns. Kosinski is a pushy, arrogant ass, and while he's not exactly a Federation bureaucrat, he's reason enough to wonder if *TNG* is going to continue *TOS*'s long tradition of assholes in uniform.

Kosinski brought a friend, though, an unnamed alien who is friendly, humble, and extremely unobtrusive. Which makes for rather clever camouflage, come to think. The alien, who we'll call The Traveler, is the one responsible for the warp drive upgrades. He comes from a mystical land of magic technology, and he's explored our universe by leapfrogging from ship to ship. Thing is, you can't tell people up front, "I'm basically a wizard, and I can futz around with your crap and make it brilliant" without getting asked a lot of tough questions that start with "Oh really?" and end with laser scalpels. So the Traveler uses Kosinski as a front to cover his own tricks. Kosinski is the perfect man for the job, because his ego allows him to believe he's making the changes himself (despite not being able to understand them), and his toxic personality means that anyone he comes in contact with will notice him first, last, and only. Plus, wouldn't you want to get this creep off your ship as soon as possible?

The con would've worked perfectly, but the Traveler is getting sick. After making goo-goo eyes at Wesley (I hadn't really noticed it till this week, but Wheaton is much too old for the part. It creates some creepy subtext, and makes the supposedly brilliant ten year-old look like an idiot savant), the Traveler goes through his usual moves, but this time, the effort is too much, and the *Enterprise* gets shot three galaxies off course. An attempt to fix the problem ends up with the ship stuck in a weird blue cloud full of floating sparks. The cloud affects the crew, and soon everyone on board is seeing physical representations of their desires and fears. Thankfully, we are spared the scene where Wesley finally gets some spooning-time in with the Captain.

The "thoughts made flesh" concept is a cliché, but not one so limited that it can't be effective, and while I was mildly entertained by the Traveller's story, I got the most charge out of the sight of the *Enterprise* hurtling through the cosmos. Gone are *TOS*'s endless white-dots-on-black starfields. This is colorful, weird, maybe a little corny, but kind of awesome if you are willing to overlook the not always pitch perfect effects. I've always been a sucker for *2001*'s "going through the monolith" sequence, and while this episode is nowhere near that kind of mesmerizing terror and wonder, I'm gratified to see the series actually trying for something a little beyond their reach, this early in the game.

But since we're still in the first season, we can't really have nice things. The Traveller's insistence that Wesley is a kind of super genius doesn't play as it was intended, I'm guessing; instead of promising exciting future developments from "the boy," it serves as a reminder of Wesley's Mary Sue status, a wish-fulfillment character whose accolades are less earned than assigned. I don't want kids on the *Enterprise*. I don't mind the idea, although... All right, that's a lie, I do mind the idea, because it changes the ship into some kind of pleasure cruise, instead of a semi-military expedition. Really, though, I just don't want to see any children in story-lines because dammit, this is supposed to be a space adventure, not "Wesley's Big Day On The Bridge." Suggesting some kind of potential Chosen One style narrative (and don't kid yourself, that's what's happening here) threatens to graft on the worst kind of serialization, bringing an unlikable character even further to the forefront of the action simply because some writer didn't get enough pats on the head growing up.

Another problem with the episode is that it doesn't really have a third act. Once the Traveller's true nature is revealed, and we get a few scenes of the *Enterprise* crew dealing with their fears made flesh (my favorite: the guy scared of fire, although Tasha's rape gang memory was also delightfully inappropriate), there's a big speech about how everyone has to think nice things about the Traveler, he repeats the warp process to get them home, and then disappears. There's nothing illogical in this, since the Traveler's abilities are ill-defined enough for a Tinkerbell Solution to not be entirely ridiculous, but it's flat and unexciting. It has a scene where Wesley reaches out and takes the Traveler's hand to save everyone on the ship, and that only would've worked if Wesley was younger

or there'd been some plotline about the two becoming lovers, which is frankly not a thought I wanted to be having.

"No One" isn't horrid, but it's too vague to be honestly good.

Grade: B-

"Lonely Among Us"

It must be difficult to fill all forty-five minutes. I've never written a teleplay before, but I have to imagine that the timing isn't always as organic as you'd like it to be. "Lonely" is a very obvious example of two disparate storylines thrown together to no real purpose. Obviously, the presence of two warring alien races on the *Enterprise* is supposed to raise the stakes when things start to go wrong, but that never really happens. After meeting the Anticans and the Selay, hearing about their enmity, and marveling at the make-up work (which is quite solid, really; the Anticans are sort of a walrus/cat hybrid, and the Selay are snake men, and both would've fit right in at the Mos Eisley cantina), there are a few short scenes reminding us that the delegates aren't too happy being around each other, Riker gets hit with a kind of glow-stick noose, and, well, that's it. Oh, there's a distinct possibility that a snake guy gets murdered and cooked, which is cool, no question.

None of that adds much to the episode's other, more central plot. While ferrying the Antican and Seleya to a neutral planet to vie for membership in the Federation, the *Enterprise* runs afoul of a mysterious dark space cloud, and takes some time out of its busy schedule to investigate. As we've learned time and again from science fiction, curiosity of the unknown is nearly always a terrible idea, killing cats and then raising them from the dead through a combination of cyborg technology and nanobites that results in super sentient felines and a lot of thoroughly dead, moderately singed rodents. Or maybe that's a little too pessimistic than intended. After all, this is *Star Trek*, not *Star You See From Your Bedroom Window After The Doors Are Bolted*. Exploration is encouraged, but that doesn't mean you can avoid the consequences.

The consequences in "Lonely" amount to a heady shock of blue lightning that gets sucked aboard via ship sensors, first possessing Worf, then Dr. Crusher, and finally (and most dangerously) Picard. The lightning, a conscious entity that really only wants to get back home, futzes around with the *Enterprise* computers, there's some suspicion of

sabotage that Riker immediately lays at the aliens' feet, and then Picard makes a big speech explaining the situation, before beaming himself back into the space cloud.

The idea is familiar, but not terrible, and give "Lonely" credit for attempting to make the alien simultaneously sympathetic and dangerous. The creature kills a member of the crew while interfering with Engineering, and while the death is "unintentional," that's not much of a comfort. One of the reasons "No One"'s climax isn't very satisfying is that our heroes don't have to do much to resolve their situation. Thinking happy thoughts isn't particularly courageous or exciting, but compared with "Lonely," it's downright dynamic. While Troi manages to uncover the possession problem, and we get an interesting conversation between the higher ups about how to handle a potentially compromised captain, the ship's contribution to the plot is largely a passive one. The alien takes over, pulls the *Enterprise* where it wants, and then beams itself home. The biggest contribution Riker and the rest make is to successfully rescue Picard after he gets turned into an energy pattern.

In fact, through all three of these episodes, we see characters enduring hardship without doing much to rise above it. It's a change of pace from Kirk's two-fisted approach to strange civilizations, and while the more thoughtful approach has potential, it's still playing overly conservative right now. I want to see Picard and the others interacting with the universe, not doing their best to muddle through unnoticed. We need more adventure, and bigger stakes. Here, even the supposedly touchy diplomatic mission is given over to bad jokes and "Gosh, aliens are crazy, huh?" eye-rolling. Combined with the slow pace and a number of dialog scenes that can be charitably described as "character development" (or more accurately as "padding"), this is an unmemorable episode that shows a series still unsure of its greatest strengths.

Grade: C-

"Justice"

It's been, what, seven episodes now, and we still haven't delved into one of *Trek's* greatest traditions: the fuckable alien. Oh sure, we've talked about sex. Tasha and Data fooled around, which I guess sort of counts as aliens screwing, and there was that scene when Beverly unzipped her uniform a bit, and, of course, Troi's cleavage.

(Plus the random guy who wanders through the background in a skirt.) But we really haven't had an episode where Picard or Riker or the others engaged in interstellar hanky-panky. That's just not right, you know? What's science fiction without half-naked green-skinned women and questionable gender politics? Nothing I'd be interested in, that's for sure.

"Justice" looks to correct this oversight with a massive dosage of morons in lingerie, and the effect is more campy and awkward than erotic. The *Enterprise* is studying a new class M planet, and the away team has discovered the natives are half naked, generically attractive, and extremely willing to make a stranger feel welcome. The doctor says the crew could use a shore leave, and where better to take one than the land of Pizza Delivery Boys, Copier Fixers, Suggestible Coeds, and Hitchhikers With Neither Grass Nor Gas. Admittedly, this is a relatively primitive culture, and the Prime Directive gets touchy whenever you poke one of those with a technologically advanced stick, but what harm could there be in investigating further? And send Wesley down, too. There's no way a young man could get into trouble around so many nubile and extraordinarily willing wet dreams.

Well, Wesley does get in trouble, naturally, although the trouble comes from clumsiness rather than horniness, but before we get to that, does this set-up strike anyone else as unbelievably stupid? It's similar to the opening of "Shore Leave," with the crew spending free time on a new world, but in "Leave," at least there was no obvious civilization in place for Kirk and the others to interfere with. In "Justice," Picard and his crew have made contact with a native race for the first time in Federation history, and instead of following strict protocol and moving on, he lays plans for, um, laying. Now, I appreciate a more devil-may-care approach, and it's nice to see an open attitude towards sexual morality, but given what happens latter in the episode, and given what we already know about Picard's devotion to the PD, this makes no sense. I don't give a damn if Troi does assure us the locals are all sunshine and buttercups. Beaming down groups of variables to a supposedly controlled environment is a really excellent way to start chain reaction, and once that happens, god help you. That's not even taking into account all the touching and hugging and screwing and so forth. Regardless of how open-minded and sensible everyone in the *Enterprise* is about making the beast with two backs, there's too much uncertainty here, even before we get to "Punishment Zones" and God.

Obviously, there's more going on here than meets the eye, because you can't ever have an idyllic paradise that doesn't involve some sort dark underside. The Edos (ie, all the goofy blond hotties) are all friendliness, but Wesley soon discovers that rule-breaking is about the only place they don't screw around. Basically, the city is full of secret "punishment zones," and if you have the misfortune of breaking a law inside one of those zones, the mediators show up and execute on the spot. The Edos justify this by citing a history of violence and horror, and I guess if you wanted to create the Penthouse Forum Planet, you should follow their lead. The problem is, poor Wesley doesn't really know what's going on, and after resisting the advances of a girl his age (it's sad; his obvious uncomfortableness is one of the few believable moments we've had from the character, but it still annoys me), he tries to get a game of tossing-the-ball-around going, and manages to fall into a small greenhouse and trample some flowers. Cue the mediators, and cue the ep's philosophical conflict: is Picard justified interfering with the locals and breaking the Prime Directive in order to save the boy?

God's watching, too, so make sure and show your work. Much like "The Apple," a presence keeps watch on the Edos and protects them from outside influence, and it's telling that Picard never questions this, or takes steps to break the aliens' hold. We know how Kirk handled a similar situation, and while the God entity here doesn't demand the same kind of servitude that the computer system of "The Apple" did, there's still a question of how much Big Brother In The Sky is dictating the pace of development down below. However Edenic the Edo's culture appears at first glance, it's childlike, and their unquestioning devotion to a Draconian system of law enforcement doesn't encourage much in the way of creative thought. (It's hard to evolve when you're too busy trying not to trip and be murdered.) "Justice" ends with "God" still in control--in fact, Picard and the others implicitly accept that there's nothing wrong with this.

It all comes back to the Prime Directive, which I'm sure we'll be examining quite closely in the months to come. Here, Picard has to puzzle out a way to save Wesley's life that doesn't violate his obligations to the Federation, and while the conflict is contrived (I can't imagine an organization as seemingly benevolent and peaceful as the Federation not having a "you can save your own kid" clause), it's interesting to see the situation taken so seriously. The problem is, the more seriously the situation is viewed, the more ridiculous it becomes. This isn't a question of

Wesley inadvertently killing or even injuring anyone. I could've bought the debate if, say, the Boy Blunder had befriended a local, and the local had gotten in trouble and Wesley decided to save her at any cost. That's not what's happening here: annoying or not, the poor kid tripped, and I have a hard time believing in a Prime Directive that doesn't allow for at least a little perspective.

This is roughly the same conclusion Picard reaches. He argues, in a weirdly abrupt finale, that "there can be no justice so long as laws are absolute." It's a dramatically sound speech in an episode that hasn't really earned it, but I appreciated the moment nonetheless. The God entity that keeps watch on the Edos is to MacGuffin to be effective (the only reason we see it at all is to prevent Picard from simply beaming Wesley back on the ship after he's captured), and the Edos are too clearly symbolic to be dramatically compelling. "Justice" strives for profundity, but it's too absurd to be taken seriously. I imagine that's a phrase I'll be using quite often.

Grade: C

Stray Observations:

- It's not a good sign when I have to keep reminding myself of an episode while writing about it. "Lonely Among Us" is deeply unmemorable, although Picard's rescue does bring up one of the problems I've always had with transporters: the question of just what's being created in that haze of sparkling lights. The Picard that beams in at the end is based on the pattern from before he left the ship, which means he has no memory of actually going out into the energy field. So does that mean this is Picard 2.0? Or is every character on the show who's ever beamed anywhere simply a copy of a copy of a copy to the nth degree, iterations of a physical being whose original presence hasn't existed in decades?
- Data's getting more likable as time goes on, thank goodness. Picard doesn't have a Kirk/Spock type relationship with anyone on the ship (he's friendly enough with Riker, but there's no sense of near-equality), but his interactions with the android aren't bad.

- Picard mentions a fondness for detective fiction in "Lonely." This leads to an awkward monologue and Data being goofy, but expect to see more of the concept soon.
- I mentioned this on my Twitter feed, but if you'll allow me a brief digression: I've read a ton of reviews of the iPad, and I understand the criticisms. It's beyond my price range right now, and I admit, I'm not sure I'd have a huge need for it even if I could afford it. But I want one because it's the closest we've come yet to the junk Geordi and Data and the others use on *TNG*. I want *Star Trek* technology in my living room.
- Next week, it's "The Battle," "Hide and Q," and "Haven."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Battle"/"Hide and Q"/"Haven"



By [Zack Handlen](#)

Apr 23, 2010 10:00 AM

"The Battle"

Line from my notes: "God, I hate the Ferengi."

Were any alien races from *TOS* this bad? I'm sure some were annoying or unfunny, but I can't remember a recurring species as one note as this. Even the Klingons were allowed a modicum of dignity, for all their warrior posturing and villainy. (Side note: Funny how Worf's Klingon is so much more feral than his supposed ancestors. I'm not even talking about the head ridges, which are an interesting visual choice at least. The Klingons we saw on *TOS* differed from the Federation largely on ideological grounds, but on *TNG*, the only Klingon we've dealt with behaves like a barely restrained attack dog who stumbled across the gift of speech. Or better yet, a werewolf learning how to be a man.) The Ferengi in "The Battle" aren't quite as one note as the ones we saw in "The Outpost," but there's still no real empathy for them on the part of the writers. They're more orcs from Middle Earth than an alien race capable of

space travel, and while the orcs worked in their context, the effect here is laughable. In a way, *TNG* is actually less progressive than *TOS*, a show two decades its senior, because *TNG* is willing to apparently dismiss an entire culture out of hand because it allows them to impress us with humanity's moral superiority.

What does all this mean for the actual episodes? Whatever its faults philosophically, an adventure show with one-note bad guys isn't automatically boring. The problem here is that the Ferengi are so irritating and clearly beneath contempt that they become ludicrous as figures of intrigue or deception. "Battle" relies on Picard and the *Enterprise* bridge crew to accept a Ferengi gift, at least initially, at face value. They catch on to the trickery before it's too late, and Picard has his own problems to worry about, but it takes them an embarrassingly long time to put the pieces together. Put it this way: if somebody showed up at your door and said, "Hey, we want to give you this weapon you used to murder a bunch of guys we knew years ago," wouldn't you be a little suspicious? And that's without the Ferengi's established worship of monetary gain.

"Battle" does provide Picard with some back-story, and while it's a pretty generic back-story overall (in that most of it could've happened to any of the characters we've met without much change), it does give us a sense of Picard's intelligence and quick wit in battle. Out of all the characters, Picard's the hardest to get a hold of, because he holds the audience at arm's length in the same way he holds his crew. In *TOS*, while Kirk stood apart from the others, he was always easy to relate to, a familiar hero figure that anchored the series and was always getting into one emotional scrape or another. So far in *TNG*, Picard is more like someone we observe than someone we identify with. (Although really, right now, who *is* the identification figure? Wesley is too precocious, and, much as it annoys me whenever he's on-screen, he really isn't central enough to the narratives to get close to. Data, maybe? Or Riker. While a cast this large offers more story potential, it also makes it harder to single anyone out, and given the ineptitude of the scripts we've seen, I don't really feel like I know any of these people yet.) Learning about the Battle of Maxia and the famous "Picard Maneuver" fleshes him out, and watching him struggle with Daimon Bok's manipulations makes him vulnerable, which gives Stewart a chance to do some heavy-lifting, acting-wise.

Ah yes, the "thought maker," a wonderfully ridiculous piece of equipment whose existence is nearly justified by Stewart's commitment, and the eerie hallucinations we see of his former bridge crew. Really, though--it's a big ping-

pong ball with a red bulb inside, and you run it by turning it back and forth. There needed to be some justification for Picard's mental breakdown, but Bok, the Ferengi captain seeking revenge for the loss of his son, isn't really much of a plan maker. Strip away all the camp and the bad acting, and the real problem with this season so far is a serious inability to make story-lines pay off in meaningful ways. Bok has the brain bomb to lower Picard's defenses, and he has a falsified log on Picard's old ship to, well, what, exactly? Data sees through the hoax in about ten minutes (although it's still long enough to be annoying, because why on earth would anyone trust information that could so easily have been tampered with? For crying out loud, we saw Wesley's magic Picard voice-box six episodes ago!), and apart from serving as a minor distraction, there doesn't seem any point in making the effort.

Picard suffers from headaches. (Which are apparently magical in the future, or something.) The headaches get worse, and then he starts having dreams of the Battle--dreams, by the way, which fail to contradict the official report, ie, the history in which Picard's destruction of a Ferengi ship was entirely justified, the history which Bok's fake log tries to disprove. If the machine is a thought *maker*, wouldn't it have made more sense to try and alter Picard's memory of the past? I wouldn't even have minded if Picard *had* had some culpability in the event. Nothing that would damn him, obviously, but this sort of plot is much more effective when the hero has lingering guilt over his past. Otherwise, there's no cost here. Bok is revenge-crazy, Bok tries to get Picard killed in a suicide assault on his own ship, Bok fails, Picard and everyone on the *Enterprise* go back to being smug. None of this holds very well together. It's not flat out embarrassing, which is a relief, but apart from a clever use of the warp drive, the most interesting moments are a handful of exchanges between Riker and the first officer of the Ferengi ship. The officers' eventual willingness to treat with Riker on even terms ("First Officer to First Officer") gives us some hope that the Ferengi might be something more than caricatures down the line, but until that happens, the less we see of them, the happier I'll be.

Grade: C+

"Hide and Q"

Yay, another Q episode! And it's... drat, it's not very good.

One thing that *TNG* has over *TOS* from the start is an origin story. *TOS* didn't ever show how its crew started working together, or what their first mission on the *Enterprise* was like. (Funny how obsessed we are with origins these days. If *TOS* was being made now, it would have to have a "getting to know you" style episode, even if that episode wasn't the pilot. Something akin to *Firefly*'s excellent "Out of Gas.") Judging by the three seasons, despite the occasional cast change, it's easy to imagine Kirk, Spock, and the rest flying around the galaxy for ages before we met them, and for ages after we left them. With *TNG*, while we don't know everything about our heroes, we know how they first arrived on the ship. There's a clear beginning, and that beginning gives their adventures a stronger sense of connected narrative. There's advantages and drawbacks to that, which we'll examine as the series progresses, but for right now, it's enough to observe that the vast potential for audience investment is being kicked to the curb over and over again.

Think about it: we know next to nothing about Data, Tasha Yar, Riker and Deanna's relationship, Beverly's dead husband (who is Wesley's dead dad), what brought Worf to Starfleet, who the hell is running Engineering. And while I'm not clamoring for to know what makes Tasha such an emotional mine field, I *am* frustrated by a lack of connection with these characters, a lack that some sense of a past could provide. Kirk, Spock, and McCoy were strong enough figures that I didn't need to know much about them to like them, but there's no one on the new *Enterprise* that has that same iconic presence, which means that we're forced to engage with the stories themselves, and, well, you know how *that's* going. To go back to *Firefly*, even though we didn't know everything about Malcolm Reynolds, or the doctor with the naked sister in a box, or the rest, their mysteries were teased along enough to give the impression that there really was a larger story at work. There's none of that here yet. What affection I have for the crew is dependent on memories of what the show will become, and on the relative likability of the cast.

I mention this because, while "Hide and Q" isn't a back-story episode, it's a perfect example of *TNG*'s lack of proper characterization, squandering an opportunity to define one of its principals in favor of a ridiculous, Rod-Serling-at-his-most-pedantic morality play. While the *Enterprise* is on its way to bring medical equipment and aid to a disaster-stricken colony, Q pops by for a visit. The Q continuum (is this the first time we get the official title? I think so) is

intrigued by humanity, and would like to offer our race a tremendous opportunity to make all our dreams come true. Picard does his best to negotiate out of the situation, but Q isn't having it. (While I generally like John De Lancie, his work in this scene crosses the line from playful to grimacing loon.) He transports Riker and most of the bridge crew to a strange planet, says a lot of philosophical mumbo jumbo, and then offers Riker the chance of a lifetime: the full powers of a Q.

It's hard to tell what Q is playing at here. Picard notes that Q has expressed interest in Riker (another missed opportunity: no Q/Deanna catfight. "Captain, I sense something. I believe it is *an ass about to be kicked*."), and Q explains how the continuum is interested, and a little afraid, of humanity's will to explore and survive. Which makes no sense, when you think about it, since it would seem an innate function of life to survive and expand outwards as far as it can. How would humans be any different than, say, Klingons in this regard? But even if we accept that humanity is somehow "special," what does giving Riker powers prove? Are they looking for a weak spot in our armor of awesome? Because if so, granting one of us some serious mojo doesn't seem like the best approach. Judging by the end of the episode, Q wanted Riker to accept his Q-ishness permanently, or at least accept that being able to give people what you think they want is a wonderful power. Even if Riker had done this, what would've been gained? If humanity ever became a threat to the Q's a thousand years down the line, would the continuum just say, "Ah, but remember... *Riker*," and the super special people would slink away, defeated?

Damn, that's a lot of question marks. All right, let's accept that Q is a weird one, that it's really difficult to grasp the motivations of a nearly immortal race, and examine how unimaginatively the episode handles the Riker side of the equation. Q selects him specifically, but judging by his actions, Riker could've just as easily been some random guest star, ala Gary Lockwood in "Where No Man Has Gone Before." At least then there'd be some risk that he'd accept the powers. Here, we have a main cast member given something we know he can't keep and stay on the show, and we get no sense of how Riker's approach to the gift is any different from how anyone else would've handled it. It's such a generic character arc: "Wow, this is nuts, I have magic!" to "Crap, I gotta use my magic to save my friends!" to "Huh, I guess I should avoid being tempted by the magic because I'm not ready for it," to "I could've

saved a life, I'm gonna use the magic, and this instantly turns me into an arrogant douchenozzle," to "Wait, so I can't force people to accept my magical gifts? I've learned an important moral lesson in humility!"

The only distinguishing mark is the ineptitude with which the final stages are handled, and that has nothing to do with Riker (or Jonathan Frakes' performance). A story like this needs to show us power corrupting a hero in a believable, organic fashion; we need to understand how a nice guy can go from giving to insisting. We don't get that here. Oh, there's an outline. Riker decides not to use his powers, then finds a dead little girl his abilities could've saved (cue Data being overly pointed here), and then Riker decides to go full God-like being. The logic is there, but the timing is off. Riker's sudden references to Picard as "Jean-Luc" would only make sense after he'd been using his powers for a while. One of the few things we know about him is his commitment to duty, and his utter inflexibility when it comes to serving his captain's best interest, and we've never had any indication that he resents being second in command.

There's also the laziness of the screenplay's moralizing. We're supposed to assume that the power's of the Q are wrong without any good reason (beyond Q's own prankishness). What if Riker *had* brought the girl back to life? A better episode would've shown him doing just that, and shown some unforeseeable yet disastrous results. Instead, we get the frankly awful gift-giving sequence. Riker makes Wesley ten years older (loved Geordi's "Hey Wes, not bad."). It's idiotic. What kind of mental defective would believe stealing ten years from someone would be a good thing? Even worse, even once the lesson is clearly learned, Riker keeps on giving, because hey, we've got ten minutes left to fill. The monsters at the beginning are fun, and we get to hear Patrick Stewart delivering Shakespeare, but mostly, this is a mess.

Grade: C-

"Haven"

I was going to say, there's nothing worse than heavy-handed moralizing, but that's not true. There are plenty of things worse. Paper cuts. Tax bills. (Did you know that there's a "Freelancer's Tax"? I didn't!) Dying alone and unloved. Lwaxana Troi.

Shudder.

I have a lot of positive memories of *TNG*, but even when I was a kid, even when my critical faculties were in their nascent stage and I thought movie novelizations were better than movies because they lasted longer--even then, I didn't much care for Lwaxana Troi. She was always in those boring "character-driven" story-lines, and she was loud and pushy and she hit on Captain Picard a lot, which was really gross. As an adult, I can say that my opinion on character-driven stories has changed significantly, and that loud isn't the problem it once was. But Lwaxana is just as one note as ever, the kind of shrill unfunny that tries to assault the audience into acceptance, and yes, hitting on Picard, still gross.

I didn't realize "Haven" was the first Lwaxana episode, and I'm going to blame all of you, even if you have mentioned it in the comments, because you clearly didn't prepare me. I have a habit of yelling at the screen when I'm annoyed or overly frustrated, and I yelled so much watching this you could imagine it was one of those television dramas from *Fahrenheit 451*, the kind where you send in for a script so you could play along at home. When I was a kid, I imagined every time I didn't like something I was watching, that was my fault, that I was missing out or having an overly emotional reaction to something other people could enjoy more fully. I'm still not entirely sure this isn't true. Maybe there are people who thought this episode was entirely hilarious. Me? I've had more entertaining (and shorter) dental appointments.

Did you know Deanna has a mother? And she's *fucking insane*. The *Enterprise* is orbiting the planet of Haven, a planet which gives the episode its title but which we'll never actually see at surface level. While everyone else on the ship prepares for some R & R, Deanna is waiting to greet guests in the Transporter Room. There's Mom, and that's bad enough, but possibly worse is Deanna's potential husband, a man she's never met but who she's betrothed to via an arrangement that is never satisfactorily explained. I think we're supposed to assume it's a typical arranged marriage, but what does either side stand to gain? Wyatt, Deanna's temporary love interest to be, is a human, not a Betazoid, and since he's already a doctor I don't imagine his family is looking for some kind of social upgrade. Lwaxana clearly despises Wyatt's parents, and they her. Were names drawn out of a hat?

Like so much bad writing, too much is assumed, and it's only going to get worse. We get comic relief with Lwaxana's arrogance, comic relief with her meddling with Picard, and some tepid attempts at romantic intrigue between Riker and Deanna. (At least now we know why their first relationship didn't work out. Deanna claims it's because Riker wants to be a ship captain above everything, but I'm betting he had one look at his potential mother-in-law and jumped aboard the first vessel he could find with a warp drive.) Oh, and there's Wyatt's mild disappointment in Deanna because she doesn't look like the dream woman he's been obsessing over since he was a child. All of this should be dramatic but it *isn't*. The Riker/Deanna/Wyatt triangle is one conversation and a few pointed looks, and it doesn't even resolve properly because Wyatt leaves before there's any actual conflict.

Issues with Lwaxana aside, the script here is also so, so weak. While everybody's all aflutter about the upcoming nuptials (to be held in the--gasp--nude!), a Tarellian ship appears and starts towards Haven. The Tarellians were thought to be extinct, wiped out by their own biological weapons, and this new ship isn't making contact with Haven or anyone, which makes the leader of Haven a little nervous. (By the way, if you're hoping for an explanation as to why the Tarellians were running silent, don't.) During the exposition dump, aka meeting of the main crew, we learn the Tarellians are a none-too-subtle criticism of modern war-mongering, but since the survivors we meet are peaceful and personality free, this revelation is as of little consequence as anything else.

Gah, let's get through this. Wyatt's dream girl is a Tarellian named Ariana, and the Tarellians, all eight of them, are actually at Haven to meet Wyatt. Why? How was this contact made? Why is the Tarellian ship full of sketches of Wyatt at various stages of development? No freakin' clue. The closest thing we get to an explanation is Lwaxana (who does the traditional, "Oh, I'll stop joking and be serious now" performance change) telling Wyatt that space and thought are one. Which, apart from being a sort of call back to Wesley's INCREDIBLY DANGEROUS COMMENT in "Where No One Has Gone Before," is meaningless. You might as well just come out and say, "Just because," or "A wizard did it," or "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious." Wyatt beams aboard the Tarellian ship, forever separating himself from all he knows and loves, and maybe there's a prophecy or something, I don't know. It's creepy, but no one seems to realize it's creepy.

Look, I'm sure Majel Barrett was a lovely human being, and her Nurse Chapel wasn't so bad. Hell, maybe Lwaxana calms down in later seasons. But here, in this episode, she is agonizing, and the fact that the episode which surrounds her is full of lazy shoulder shrugs and half-finished ideas. If I'd been watching this when it first aired, if "Naked Now" hadn't been enough to turn me away, this might've done it. The silver box that delivers messages was cool, and I laughed at Data's fascination with sniping during the dinner scene, but aside from that, I kind of wanted to die.

Grade: D

Stray Observations:

- I have no idea how Tasha Yar could've risen this high in Starfleet. She has no impulse control: one minute she's antagonizing a being of near limitless power, the next she's hitting on Captain Picard. She's less a human being than a YouTube comments thread.
- It's great how Q explains all that crap about a penalty box, sends Tasha away, and--that's it. Weak, guys.
- Out of Context Theater Presents: "I just caught my father practicing naked in front of the mirror."
- Up next week: "The Big Goodbye," "Datalore," and "Angel One."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Big Goodbye"/"Datalore"/"Angel One"



By [Zack Handlen](#)

Apr 30, 2010 9:36 AM

"The Big Goodbye"

Being on a star-ship must be stressful. You're floating in a big box in the middle of thousands of miles of emptiness, there's the constant threat of alien tomfoolery to muck up your day, and every so often, Picard yells at you just to prove he can. Shore leave is nice enough, but there are long stretches of time when the closest planet is too dangerous or too far away to serve as a vacation spot, in which case you have to make due with what's at hand. So you play some video games and you watch movies to pass the time. You lock Wesley in a closet and record his sobbing to play over the ship's intercom. That only goes so far, though. What happens when you get tired of high scores, conversation, and tormenting twerps?

Preventing stress and insanity are the only real justifications possible for the holodeck. It's a thoroughly ridiculous piece of technology, because there are so few limits on its abilities. Nothing created in the 'deck can exit it, but apart

from that, there's no space restriction, no programming gaps, and the computer-generated characters seem just a hair's breadth away from conscious awareness. I can understand creating environments, and even letting people walk around inside their favorite film, but the level of interaction here is astonishing. There's no repeated conversation. Everyone on the *Enterprise* talks about how amazing Data is, but compared to a magic room that can bring your wildest fantasy to life, I'm not sure what the big deal is. Maybe Tasha Yar has been telling stories.

Or maybe it's just that Data's a reliable chap, and having a holodeck around is a little like owning an X-box that periodically eats your cat. All that amazing technology comes with a price, and that price is that any outside interference whatsoever causes the internals to go haywire and put people's lives at risk. This makes for a reliable, if hokey, plot generating machine. All you have to do is overlook the fact that a non-essential device is allowed to remain on the ship even after repeatedly causing widespread havoc.

"The Big Goodbye" is the first episode to lean on the 'deck for story purposes, and because of that, we get a lot of talk from characters waxing rhapsodic about its wonders. Most of this comes from Picard, whose mind is apparently blown by technology that has to be at least a decade old. (The first holodeck episode was in the animated series, but since that was focused on environments, we can give them the benefit of the doubt here and assume that "living" characters are a relatively new development.) It's pretty ridiculous. The best way to convince an audience of the wonders of some made-up future tech is to have the heroes treat it like it's no big deal. The more you try and impress upon us how amazing this all is, the more likely we are to notice that, well, it's not *that* amazing. Here, the holodeck does some '30s detective novel pastiche, and while the concept is impressive, the "reality" of the environment is as real as another studio set.

As for the pastiche, I'm big on Raymond Chandler, so I can appreciate the effort. "Goodbye" gets its title from two Chandler novels: the first Philip Marlowe book, *The Big Sleep*, and the best, *The Long Goodbye*. (Random: Robert Altman did a terrific film adaptation of *Goodbye*. If you haven't seen it, check it out.) However, the actual plot details crib mostly from Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. You've got a Joe Cairo stand-in, a Gutman stand-in, and everybody's looking for some mysterious object that Picard, as detective Dixon Hill, supposedly hid someplace. The suits are nice, and it's always fun seeing Dick Miller pop in, and Lawrence Tierney is certainly

imposing enough. But there's a flatness to all of this, because for large chunks of time, we're watching characters enjoying themselves more than we are. We get the usual "Gosh wasn't the past quaint?" talk, and Picard even invites in an expert from the 20th century to accompany him. Of course, the guy's only there so somebody can get shot in the third act, but given how much passion Picard supposedly has for the books, why the hell doesn't he know all the important information already?

In order to give the episode some dramatic tension, the *Enterprise* is rendezvousing with the Jarada, an insect-like race with a highly unusual language. They consider even the slightest mispronunciation a grievous insult, so there's a lot of so-so comedy about Picard trying to properly memorize the greeting, in order not to put off trading negotiations for another twenty years. This makes barely any sense. If the Federation knows the Jarada are so touchy, and if they've been waiting this long to get the greeting right, wouldn't they have a specialist who was prepared in the language to complete the ritual? There has to be someone more comfortable with it than Picard. In our first scene of the episode with him, Troi is teaching him basic Jaradan grammar rules, which doesn't instill a lot of confidence. When it finally comes time for the exchange, Picard triumphantly delivers his lines, and then the *Enterprise*... leaves. I appreciate the effort to give the diplomacy missions a "been there, done that" vibe, and to give the crew duties to fulfill without completely explaining them. It helps the environment of the show to spill out over the edges, to give the illusion that there are all sorts of interesting things happening between episodes. But this doesn't make much sense.

There's also the fact that a Jaradan probe fries the holodeck, briefly trapping Picard, Beverly, Data, and Professor Dead Meat inside. This should be interesting, and it's not terrible, but it does come off half-baked. Once the Professor is wounded, Picard negotiates with the villains, trying to explain the situation to them, and the villains decide in some dim way that they want to escape to the real world. So when the doors to the holodeck finally open (it's hilarious how, after all that effort to find Picard and fix the machine, nobody's waiting for them in the hall. How many exits does the holodeck have?), the villains try and escape and, for some reason, slowly disappear. It's not the disappearing I object to, mind. It's the fact that it happens so gradually. Very silly.

And really, that's all this is. I'll give it points for being inoffensively silly, and for at least having a tenable central idea, but the pacing is lousy, and the last ten minutes or so just kind of happens.

Grade: B-

"Datalore"

I always forget that Data is a mystery. I can't decide if that's good or bad. I *think* it's good. I mean, I was just talking about how the best way to introduce future tech is to treat it as a given ("Mom, I'm off to the Tashi Station to pick up some power converters!"), and the way Picard and the others act around their mechanical man is about as straightforward as possible. So when we find out the *Enterprise* is making a side trip to visit the planet where Data was discovered years ago, it's a nice moment of acknowledgement that doesn't arrive over-dramatized. Sure, Data's origins are uncertain, but there are a lot of weird things going on in the galaxy, you can't get too hung up on any of them and hope to get by.

Except there's a difference between acceptance and apathy, and I'd say the line gets crossed here. Data was found on a stone platform by a Federation ship (the *Tripoli*, for trivia enthusiasts). There had been a farming colony on the planet, but everybody was dead, which is already a warning sign, one that no one on the *Tripoli* felt compelled to investigate, because they just grabbed the newly conscious Data and vamoosed. Hell, Geordi manages to discover Dr. Noonien Soong's hidden lab after roughly three minutes of looking aimlessly around. It stretches credibility to think that the Federation could find a fully working positronic brain--housed inside an animatronic body, to boot--and not do any follow-up.

Ah, but if anyone had bothered, they might've started wondering about all those missing farmers, and then, when they discovered the disassembled Lore in Soong's lab, they might have not have quite so excited to build Data 2.0. Or maybe they wouldn't have had any concerns. Picard certainly doesn't seem to. His biggest worry is that Data's loyalty will transfer from the Federation over to this new found "brother." (It's a scene that seems out of place, but in a fascinating way. Would Picard give this speech to any alien member of the crew who came in contact with others of their kind? Obviously not; the singularity of Data's case makes him unique. Still, the conversation is at odds with

the well-scrubbed geniality of so much of the series. "We welcome you," says the captain, "but only if you remember what your priorities are.") In order for Lore to work as a villain, he has to be unexpected, and in order for him to be unexpected, Data's origins have to be indeterminate but non-threatening. Our heroes are curious, but unsuspecting, and that makes them the perfect dupes.

As villains go, Lore is a good one. Partly it's seeing the normally reliable Data behaving like a dickhead, and partly it's Spiner's impressive talent for throwing smarm. The actor gets a good showcase for his talents here, especially the scenes with just Lore and Data talking to each other; it never feels overly gimmicky or contrived. Lore serves as a subtle rebuke to Data's quest for humanity, because Lore is gifted with a full arsenal of human emotion, and it's rendered him childish, arrogant, and essentially mad. Of course, Lore was the first android model, so Soong had some kinks to work out; maybe the scientist decided that the only way to build a thinking machine that could feel in a responsible, mature fashion would be to design one that had to earn emotion as opposed to being "born" with it. Whatever the story-reasoning, the in-episode effect is to give us a character who is capable of exploiting the trust Data has earned from everyone around him to nefarious purposes. There's a lot of potential there, even if "Datalore" only scratches the surface.

That's really been the trademark of season one so far. Even the episodes with potential don't do enough with it, and the clumsiness in the writing is a constant distraction. We're told Data can't use contractions. I wouldn't mind if this was a "one-episode-only" loophole, as it's a small concession, and there are ways to work around it if you're clever enough. Unfortunately, Data uses multiple contractions before Lore is discovered, and worst of all, at the climax of the episode. Lore pretends to be Data, Wesley finds him out, Data beams Lore out of the ship, Picard asks Data if he's all right, and Data replies, "I'm fine." The line actually punishes you for paying attention, because now you'll be half-convinced that the wrong robot was beamed away, and that Lore somehow won out in the end.

Oh, and there's Wesley. Y'know, for once, I'm in the little bastard's corner. I blame the writing. After Lore incapacitates Data and assumes his role on the bridge, Wesley becomes suspicious and tries to communicate his suspicion to Picard. Picard tells him to shut up, and then, when Wesley continues to object that something is very wrong, *Beverly* tells him to shut up. It's bizarre. Not only is Wesley absolutely correct, Picard's immediate irritation

with him flies in the face of their supposedly developing friendship. It's a forced reaction, done to drag out the tension. If Picard *had* listened, then Lore would've been in trouble, and we never would've gotten to the final act. That doesn't make it acceptable, though. Much as I dislike Wesley, he deserves better than this. He was actually behaving reasonably for once, and I'd like to see that encouraged.

Grade: B-

"Angel One"

Oh lord.

Gender politics on *Star Trek* have never been very cutting edge. For all their grand visions of the future, genre writers have often struggled with an inability to create convincing female characters, or give them a role to play beyond "pretty, pretty princess" or "shrew." In the sixties, this was forgivable. Different times, different values, and maybe the Sexual Revolution hadn't really caught up to Prime Time quite yet. We can accept this as a flaw inherent in the design, mention it when it becomes impossible to ignore, but generally get on with our lives. I expected more from *TNG*. Not because the '80s were a hotbed for feminism (maybe they were, I'm not all that well-educated), but because *that* now is closer to *our* now. I mean, I was alive in the '80s! Women had jobs and everything back then.

Here we have a brand new cast, and we have women in leading roles, which is great. There's the doctor, no problems there, and the counselor who reads people's emotions... um. Well, maybe that will prove more useful later on. How about the head of security? That's undeniably bad-ass, right? I mean, once you get past her clear psychological problems and the whole "rape gang" issue, she's a strong, forceful character, one who flies off the handle at a moment's provocation, which is exactly the attitude you'd want in someone in her position. Er. Still, it's a step in the right direction. We live in a world, after all, when casting a woman as a star ship captain was somehow considered a big deal. Geeks don't really enjoy "change," especially when that change involves ladies who yell and order and don't charge by the hour.

So I'll give them some credit. Then "Angel One" shows up, and, gah, I don't even know anymore. It's not even as though the episode was *that* bad. It mostly made sense, or at least it made roughly the same amount of sense as everything else we've seen so far. Apart from Riker's ridiculous outfit, nothing here made me cringe with embarrassment ala "The Naked Now." But the concept is so thoroughly inane that I feel like I can't give this a passing grade.

The planet of Angel One is a matriarchy, because here, the women are physically powerful and the men are weak and wear lots of paisley. It's exactly like Earth used to be, only with the gender roles reversed. Oh wow, what a crazy mix-up! And you know, when the women get the power, they go absolutely nuts with it. Like, dictatorship and disagree-with-me-on-penalty-of-death style nuts. It's the sort of place the new Enterprise should avoid like the plague, given the dictates of the Prime Directive. I mean, a matriarchy is such an obvious affront to God and Nature that any red-blooded male wouldn't be able to stop himself from getting involved. Too bad, then, that Picard and the rest of his team of misfits have tracked three escape pods from the disabled freighter *Odin* to the Angel One. Looks like it's time for some red hot Riker interference.

Sci-fi nearly always gets goofy when it posits matriarchal societies. "Angel One" is a more modern version of movies like *Queen Of Outer Space*, which features a team of dude astronauts crash-landing on a planet ruled by, well, you follow the rest. In *Queen*, the men have to rescue the "good" women (all of whom are just aching for it, if you know what I mean, and I really wish you'd explain it to me) from the evil queen, whose evilness rests on the fact that she was horribly burned, making her physically ugly and therefore undesirable. She has the gall to hit on the hero of the movie, and even though the hero could save everyone's lives by sucking it up, he's overcome by the Butherface Blues, rejects her, and winds up with Zsa Zsa Gabor. It's an amazing picture, I strongly recommend checking it out.

The point, anyway, is that matriarchies in fiction are often built around powerful women who would be perfectly happy hanging out at home if they ever met a *real* man. "Angel One" doesn't do a damn thing to buck this trend, despite its pretensions towards depth. Beata, the elected leader of the only society we ever meet, is forceful, direct, and calm. She's also immediately turned on by Riker's masculine charms, and while she doesn't go quite so far as to abdicate

power, she does sleep with him, and pay more attention to his big speech at the end of the episode than she otherwise might've. There's a lot of hilarious sexual harassment, which is funny because, see, usually it's a *man* who does the harassing, not the woman! Ha! Crazy times. I'm not sure what the reversal is supposed to achieve, honestly. It's like when *Disclosure* came out, and to teach men a lesson because good lord, who'd want Demi Moore groping them at work?

Even worse is how completely the episode dismisses the male population of the planet. Beata is trying to put down a potential rebellion, which prompts Riker to give a lecture on evolution and progress and so forth, but the only reason Angel One is experiencing any civil unrest is due to those pesky survivors of the *Odin*. They crash-landed, and repaid the locals' hospitality by immediately seducing and marrying some of them. Going by the Prime Directive--the Directive that gets referenced multiple times in this episode--isn't this a bad thing? The "progress" here is being introduced by an outside influence, and not developing organically from within the society. The men of Angel One are largely background noise. Only one gets a name, and he doesn't seem all that keen on the revolution, to tell the truth. Really, this is just another version of the *Queen* fantasy world. These women aren't entirely alone, but the guys they do have are so obviously inferior to *real* men that they're willing to throw over their culture and betray their race for a chance at the Marlboro Man.

There's a sub-plot about a virus loose on the *Enterprise*. It's silly, although it does give us Geordi alone on the Bridge for a scene or two. (I like Geordi. Admittedly, his role on the show right now is mostly just comic-relief, but I like him.) The virus is used to make predicament of Riker and his away team more pressing, because Beverly refuses to allow anyone back on the ship once the infection starts spreading. This is absurd. The illness hadn't caused any deaths yet, and the *Odin* survivors were facing execution. Besides, how hard is it to quarantine people on a space ship? The *Enterprise* should have stronger protocols for potential contaminants, giving how often the crew members interact with alien races. To have everything collapse because of a bad case of the sniffles is absurd.

That's par for the course for this episode, though. As an attempt to approach real-life social issues from a different angle, it's a failure, and that makes it impossible to enjoy on a pure story level. I'm willing to put up with a lot, *TNG*, but you'll have to do better than this.

Grade: F

Stray Observations:

- After his flirtation with likability in "Datalore," Wesley returns to twerp status in "Angel One." Seriously, did you see that outfit? There's such a thing as over-crocheting.
- According to Wesley, if he doesn't handle the holodeck properly, "The program could abort and everyone inside could vanish." Sounds safe to me!
- "I think I may sneeze." "A Klingon sneeze?" "The only kind I know."
- Speaking of, I've been sick myself this week, so apologies if this recap is more scatter-brained than usual.
- Next week, it's "11001001," "Too Short A Season," and "When The Bough Breaks."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "11001001"/"Too Short A Season"/"When The Bough Breaks"



By [Zack Handlen](#)

May 7, 2010 10:00 AM

"11001001"

Every time I see this episode title, I get a Flight of the Conchords song in my head.

Maybe I'm suffering from some sort of weird Stockholm Syndrome/Ludvico Treatment hybrid effect, but I found two of this week's three episodes to be a substantial improvement over much of what we've already covered, and even the weak link of the bunch had some promising moments. The cast is settling into their roles: Picard's belligerence has hit a comfortable level, Data isn't doing that freaky grin anymore, Wesley is occasionally bearable, and Tasha Yar doesn't get many lines. Even better, the stories are improving, with stronger pacing, clearer conflicts, and a more definite sense of identity. While they aren't perfect, the scripts are beginning to come out from the shadow of *TOS*, and taking advantage of *TNG*'s one great asset over its predecessor: a larger universe to play in.

On *TOS*, Kirk and the rest bounced from world to world without much sense of connection between places. On the new series, Picard and his *Enterprise* are part of a definite system, and that means a different kind of storytelling.

For example: in *TOS*, starbases acted like townships in Westerns, small pockets of isolated civilization trying to hold together in the face of a million miles of untamed void. Starbase 74, which the new *Enterprise* visits at the start of "11001001," is more like a post office or a city hall, a comfortable, professional location where trustworthy people do reliable things. The ship is due for some routine maintenance, and the holodeck needs looking in to; this last is mostly mentioned as set-up for what happens later in the episode, but it also works as casual continuity with "The Big Goodbye," so that's nice. While the work gets done, the crew finds ways to keep themselves busy.

I've mentioned *TNG*'s strong sense of community before, and "11001001" does an excellent job of reinforcing that, following Riker around as he visits all the leads in turn to try and find some way to keep himself occupied. Beverly Crusher is attending a lecture by a leader in the field of cybernetics; Tasha Yar and Worf are off to play some made-up future game; and Geordi is helping Data paint a picture. None of this is strictly necessary plot-wise. That's another interesting departure from the original show, which had ample padding, but very few "pure character" moments. It's effective, too. Instead of feeling like wasted time, Riker's walking tour increases our emotional attachment to the cast, and helps build the illusion the stories we see don't end when the camera stops rolling.

Still, we're not going to get an entire episode of that sort of thing, so eventually a plot emerges. For technical work, the Federation employs the Bynars, a race of bald, child-sized gray aliens who have evolved a special, highly dependent relationship with computers. They communicate with each other and name themselves in binary (hence the episode title), work in pairs, and are able to compile and enter massive amounts of data in very short periods of time. Now, you'd think Picard would be a little suspicious after the last alien to come through and muck about with his ship, but clearly the Bynars are an accepted part of organization, so the captain leaves them to their work without so much as a suspicious glance.

Surprise surprise, the Bynars are up to something, which doesn't become evident until Riker makes a trip to the holodeck and meets a lovely computer simulation named Minuet. Minuet easily wins Riker over (my favorite part of

this is how Number One acts like it's true love, when she's just a program designed to feed him exactly what he wants to eat), keeping him on the 'deck until Picard comes to see what's going on. She manages to ensnare Picard as well, just long enough for the Bynars to send out a fake message that the engines are about to asplode, forcing Data, commanding officer due to Riker and Picard's incommunicado status, to evacuate the *Enterprise*. It's a good sequence, because even though we know the ship isn't going to blow up, the crew doesn't, and the efficiency of the ruse is quite satisfying.

Also satisfying: the holodeck does exactly what's it's supposed to do, and no more. That's going to be an increasingly rare event as the show progresses. The Bynars steal the *Enterprise* and bring it back to their home world, Bynaus, in order to save their civilization. A star in a neighboring system went super-nova, sending out an EMP that would threaten the integrity of the Bynaus mainframe. Given how much the Bynars depend on their computer systems, this was very bad news indeed, and they decided to grab a star-ship and download all the necessary information into its hard-drives to allow them a chance to reboot after the pulse passed. The holodeck distraction/seduction was a back-up, in case their timing was off and they needed someone around to get them up and running again. And it works, without any need for malfunctioning equipment or self-aware literary characters. (Although the Bynars are lucky, because Picard being along for the ride wasn't a part of their plan. He just happened to check on Riker at the right time to fall into the trap, but if he hadn't been there, the plan would've failed because the Bynar system requires two people for the rebooting process.)

I had fun with this, which I wasn't expecting. It's one of the few first season episodes I could remember before re-watching, and last time I saw it, I thought Riker and Minuet's interactions were cheesy as hell. They didn't bother me so much now, because they don't go on very long, and there's something hilarious about a man trying to seduce a computer simulation designed to respond to his seductions. There's an episode down the line that'll give me a chance to go into the idea in more depth, but it'll be a while before we get there, so for right now: how psychologically healthy can the holodeck really be? On the one hand, I can imagine it serving as an excellent stress reliever, and it could even build the self-esteem of nervous or insecure young people who will take any kind of encouragement they can get. But on the other hand, it's already difficult enough separating fiction from reality. The sex stuff makes for

good jokes and squirming, but what about someone who falls in love with a phantom that will never get tired, never leave them, never break their heart? *TNG* is big on the "perfect" future, so, for now at least, we don't see a lot of tortured psyches. But I imagine there's gotta be some kind of limit of use on these machines, and you'd probably want a competent psychological counselor keeping an eye out in case somebody got twitchy. (Again, this becomes more relevant in a season or two.)

Riker's romance with Minuet is played for a little more poignancy than it really deserved, and there's a surprising lack of conflict for all the running around, but I thought this was solid.

Grade: B

"Too Short A Season"

Okay, this one I didn't like as much. To repeat a point I made in a *TOS* review, genre fiction has a long established habit of telling us the things we dream of aren't the things we really want. Immortality, untold riches, the love of millions, an empty world full of books--all of these things sound good, but, if we're going by the lessons we learn from our favorite writers, they've all got nasty hooks built in, catches so small you don't notice the danger till they rip your heart out. The dramatic irony in granting wishes that hurt the wisher without changing a word is sound, but after years of being taught the same lesson, you can't help but wonder if all this insistence on not aiming for the impossible might be unreasonable, especially when it comes to eternal youth. Sure, it would most likely stagnate our race and you could, theoretically, become incredibly bored if you lost that invisible expiration date, but I dunno, I wouldn't mind sticking around a thousand years or two just to be sure.

"Too Short A Season" has that classic staple, the de-aging drug, and if anybody went into this expecting a happy ending, they haven't been paying attention. The political maneuverings are a new side to the show, and there's a darkness we haven't really dealt with before, which was solid turn. Admiral Mark Jameson's third act confession is a nasty piece of business, the sort of mistake you can imagine a well-meaning but arrogant and short-sided young man making, and the consequences are impressive, but the episode is undone by a weak central performance, and a sci-fi angle which is too familiar to be as tragic as it should be. Oh, and the ending ties up waaaay too neatly.

I knew I recognized Clayton Rohner. He plays Jameson, and though he's caked in unconvincing old age make-up when we first see him, he's in plain view by the end. (I always think this kind of story would be better served by casting two actors in the role. Probably not possible due to budget constraints, but the make-up gives away the game too early. I see someone slathered in lumpy laytex, I start waiting to see what they'll look like once the make-up is gone. The lesson here is the importance of aging gracefully, but the effects are so distracting that youth seems like the more natural state. I'm not sure it's effective to give us ample opportunity to cringe at the old guy's weird face.) Rohner doesn't get around quite enough to be one of the "Hey, it's that guy!" crew, but he did play the male lead in *Just One Of The Guys*, a movie I largely remember for the scene when Joyce Hyser opens her tuxedo shirt. He's lousy here, acting like a Muppet when he's supposed to be elderly and weak, then laying on the over-heated angst once his youth is restored. The ideas here aren't terrible, but Jameson is so thoroughly unlikable that it's hard to care much what happens to him.

As for the sci-fi tragedy... Picard and the *Enterprise* are sent to pick Jameson up when a hostage crisis breaks out on Mordan IV. Karnas, the leader of the planet, sends a message that the terrorists who've taken the hostages (Federation staff, of course) are only willing to deal with Jameson, who, in his less-plastic-face days was a respected negotiator who'd previously had dealings with Karnas and his people. Jameson's old now, and grumpy, but more than willing to go back to Mordan IV to save the day. Once aboard the *Enterprise*, though, strange things start happening to the man. He has painful attacks, and that would be a concern if Jameson didn't appear to be getting stronger and healthier with each passing hour. Not just healthier; his hair comes back, regains its color, his skin smooths out, and he's pretty randy, too, to the dismay of his wife.

After dodging the issue for some time, Jameson finally comes clean. There's a mystical de-aging drug, he got his hands on some doses, and while he'd been administering them in the recommended portion for some time, the sudden emergency (and shot at redemption) convinced him it was necessary to take all the magic meds at once. Now he's back in his late twenties, but his body isn't handling the change very well, and his wife believes he betrayed her by keeping it a secret. Then, just to completely bum everybody out, Jameson explains to Picard the real reason Karnas requested him specifically. The last time Jameson was on Mordan IV, Karnas was the one with the hostages,

demanding the Federation give him some proper weapons so he could take over the planet. Jameson gave in, but he also gave weapons to all of Karnas's enemies. In this way, he believed he was holding to the Prime Directive, which is a terribly obvious piece of poor rationalization, made all the more evident when the whole planet was plunged into four decades of civil war. Nice work!

We get some good dialog with the regular crew, and conceptually, a man so desperate to redeem his past that he'll risk everything to relive it has thematic and plotting potential. Plus, it's good to get periodic reminders why the Prime Directive is so important. Come to think of it, this episode works as a direct response to "A Private Little War" back in *TOS*, when Kirk ended up giving a group of natives some phasers to try and balance the damage done by Klingon interference. That episode was willing to acknowledge the double-edged nature of the situation, and "Short" confirms just how ineffective such action ultimately is.

Really, though, I can't get past how over-the-top Jameson was, and how it's painfully easy to chart out his character's arc the instant you realize he's taken a youth serum. He's gonna die, because they always do, and it's hard to get that worked up about it. Tragedy can gain resonance from our expectations, but it needs to expose some greater emotional truth, and that really isn't the case here. I could see this sort of thing working in *TOS*--and hell, Rohner's performance would've fit nicely next to Shatner--but it's too old-school, too willing to accede to our expectations, to be effective. Besides, it's hard to get caught up in a story in which our main characters are largely incidental.

Grade: C+

"When The Bough Breaks"

This episode features children. And Wesley. And Wesley spending time with children. And you know what? I *liked it*. I know. I'm scared too.

Part of my affection may have something to do with the way "When The Bough Breaks" starts with what I've decided is a *Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* reference. In *Guide*, Zaphod Beeblebrox steals the *Heart Of Gold* in order to find Magrathea, the most improbable planet in the galaxy, whose inhabitants were technologically advanced

enough to actually build other planets. The resemblance to Aldea, the mythical planet that the *Enterprise* discovers at the start of "Bough," isn't close enough for me to be certain that it's a nod to Douglas Adam's novel, but it's close enough that I can enjoy my suspicions, at any rate. Legend has it that the Aldeans were technologically advanced, and that they hid themselves away from the universe. And just like in *Guide*, it's not a very nice place to visit.

We're used to super-advanced races on *Trek*, because evolution and development doesn't move at a single galactic rate. Also, really advanced people can do basically whatever the writers want them to do, which opens up the story possibilities significantly. Here, the Aldeans, led by hottie Rashella and hottie-for-very-particular-tastes Radue (Played by Jerry Hardin, who was Deep Throat on *The X-Files*. Kind of regretting the last joke right now, because I'm worried I'll have some truly horrid dreams later tonight.) contact the *Enterprise*, act very welcoming, and even beam themselves onto the bridge of the ship with a gift basket. Their planet is cloaked, they're shielded so that it's seemingly impossible for anyone to beam down without their consent, and they seem very friendly. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, there's the probe that zaps Wesley and all the other children aboard the ship, for starters. This is just a prelude to the real assault: kidnapping seven kids (including Wes) down to Aldea. The Aldeans, for reasons they don't understand, are unable to bear children, and they want some fresh faces to keep the race going. Whether from arrogance, a misunderstanding of cultural values, or the desperation of their need, Radue and the others think they can bargain their crime away by offering payment in exchange for the swiped kiddies. Obviously that's not going to fly, since, as Troi explains to them and the audience, humans are "unusually" attached to their offspring. (I don't buy this at all, by the way.) Picard is pissed, Dr. Crusher is freaking out, and nobody's going to tell either of them that a civilization of super-geniuses knows better than they do.

Actually, that's overstating. The Aldeans seem decent enough, apart from the kidnapping, but they don't have any idea how all their uber-sweet tech works. The whole thing is run by a computer system they call "The Custodian," and they prefer to press a few buttons and let the programming take care of the rest. In fact, they get downright annoyed when Wesley tries to ask questions, and as much as I sympathize with anyone who gets irked by the Prince of Dorkness, once again I find myself on Wesley's side. Blind acceptance is almost never a healthy choice in science

fiction, especially when computers are involved, and it's not surprising that the Aldeans inability to procreate stems from their ignorance. The power source for their planet's shield has given them radiation poisoning--poisoning that, ironically, would've rendered Wesley and the other children just as sterile as the natives, given enough time.

While the presence of children on the *Enterprise* has been mentioned before, this is the first time we've had extensive contact with them beyond Wes, and it's not as bad as it could've been. They're cute and precocious, but they aren't sassy, thankfully, and they aren't required to act too far above their ages. Given the short amount of time that passes, their separation anxiety isn't all that powerful, but it's easy to dislike the Aldeans for their presumption, and as much as this episode gives us proof of the stupidity of bringing children on a ship like the *Enterprise*, the end result is yet another reminder of this ship as a unit of people, and not just a backdrop where the main characters can kill time between adventures.

Wesley's attempt at rebellion through passive resistance is an effective choice, considering the team he has to work with. Of course, there's never any real worry the children will be left behind, and since the Aldeans are peaceful enough that there's no risk of physical harm coming to anyone, the conflict lacks a certain edge. Plus, the fact that there's a solution to the problem that makes everyone happy is something of a cop-out. Once the source of the radiation is discovered--the energy battery that powers the planetary cloaking device--Crusher is able to heal the whole population. That's *too* happy, honestly. It's okay if there's a little blood left over by the end credits, because if conclusions are always perfectly neat, their essential artificiality becomes even more difficult to ignore.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- Picard makes reference to a "personal relaxation light." Apparently, the future is too cool for reading lamps.
- I like that Riker can be a dick sometimes: "A blind man teaching an android how to paint"

- "Their phasers, sir, set on kill." "Thank you, Mr. Data, I have heard the sound before."
- Alexandra: cute as a button... or cuter?
- Next week, we look at "Home Soil," "Coming Of Age," and "Heart Of Glory"

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Home Soil"/"Coming Of Age"/"Heart Of Glory"



By [Zack Handlen](#)

May 14, 2010 10:00 AM

"Home Soil"

I never did well in science class. I got by, and it wasn't until I took Physics my senior year of high school that my grades started to truly suck, but I've always been more of a broad strokes kind of guy. Science requires patience, logic, and a meticulous attention to detail, while I'm hyper, intuitive (which means I jump to conclusions and never show my work), and lucky if I spell "meticulous" right, as anyone who's read these self-edited recaps can tell you. What I'm getting at is, while I love reading science fiction, I'm not clever enough to be able to tell you if a concept is absurd or practical. If it works in the context of the story, that's good enough for me.

I think "Home Soil" works, and works well, and it's a terrific example of a kind of story that the *TOS* never really delved into: hard sci-fi. It's called "hard" (heh) because it takes existing knowledge and projects only slightly outwards from it, instead of just throwing in a few words like "space" and "lasers" to make it all seem technological.

Kirk's *Enterprise* ran into all sorts of aliens and oddities, but while it did make overtures to more grounded writing, you never got the impression any of the writers on the show did serious research before putting plots together. (That sounds like an insult, but it isn't. There were a lot of very smart writers on *TOS*; it's more that the direction of the series meant stressing emotional highs over intellectual ones.) Take "Devil In The Dark," "Home Soil"'s closest *TOS* analog. The silicon-based life-form, the miners, and the development that the "monster" is just trying to protect its young are all things that fit into our concept of how life works. The "devil" is designed to look dangerous and frightening, and apart from its ability to consume rock, it's still identifiably animal. The miners didn't realize they were murdering its young, but they did know they were looking at a living creature when they stumbled across Mama.

"Home Soil"'s crystal behaves in much the same way as the horta did, attacking invading human's in response to an unintentional threat, and that threat once again stems from a human difficulty in conceiving of life that isn't immediately comparable to ourselves. The difference here is that "Soil" goes to greater lengths than "Dark" to make the "monster" as striking as possible without sacrificing the plausibility of its design. This makes it less exciting as a creature, but more intriguing as an idea, and gives *TNG* yet another route to distinguish from its predecessor.

Picard and company pay a visit to Velara III, a planet currently inhabited by a small group of terraformers (really, really small; either the process is largely automated, or the *Enterprise* caught them around break week). Kurt Mandl, head of the group, is polite but brusque, and Troi senses "deliberate concealment" from him as to events on the planet. Once we find out the situation later in the episode, this "concealment" seems like an attempt at injecting mystery that doesn't really pan out. While Mandl has some suspicions about the real natives of Velara, he doesn't seem to know enough to be as paranoid as he clearly is here.

Picard sends down an away team, and everybody gets a lecture on the terraforming process from Luisa Kim, the group's lone female scientist and the one who doesn't have a strong grasp of "numbers," I guess because she's a girl and all. (It's a small thing, but when you have a group of four people working on a what must be a costly and important project, why not just hire somebody who gets the big picture *and* understands fractions?) The lecture is a bit like walking through an exhibit at the Boston Museum of Science, so I had trouble paying attention and my feet

hurt after a couple minutes. Even in its best episodes, *TNG* still has a problem staying on topic. Again, though, there's that grounding in fact that means when things get weird, we've got a foundation to stand on.

The weirdness first hits when a hydraulic laser kills a member of the terraforming crew. There's a great scene here when Data and Geordi investigate the problem, and Data has to outwit the laser on his own, and because he's a badass robot and everything, he manages it just fine. While investigating, the pair discovers a shiny Thing that's giving off strange light patterns. They beam Thing 1 up to the *Enterprise* for study, and that's when the situation becomes even more complicated. Thing 1 is a non-carbon-based lifeform. In the process of making the planet habitable for humans, the terraformers have been inadvertently creating great swaths of destruction through locals they didn't realize were there.

While Thing 1 multiplies and eventually manages to communicate with Picard (the Things are not pleased, and refer to humans as "ugly giant bags of mostly water"), up until the actual communication, this is the sort of escalating threat you'd expect to see in an early Michael Crichton novel like *The Andromeda Strain*. It's not what you'd call "sexy," in that the threat is basically a bunch of small shiny objects that eventually coalesce into a medium-sized glowing crystal you could probably pick up at Spencer's Gifts. But it's thoughtful, and the tension comes not from smart people making stupid decisions, but from a situation that escalates in unpredictable ways.

The terraformers themselves are broadly drawn. Luisa is pleasant, but very weepy, (hilariously, when Picard is trying to figure out what everyone knows, Troi tells Riker to go James Bond on Luisa because he'd have a better chance getting info out of her) and the biggest impression we get off Bjorn comes from his haircut. The guy looks like he just stepped out of an Italian *Road Warrior* knock-off. Mandl is an authoritarian ass, which does give us the chance to watch Picard put somebody in their place, but once the actual nature of the threat is discovered, the miners are sidelined.

The only problem with hard sci-fi is that it can end up, well, a little on the dry side. Which makes it ideal for a regular series like *TNG*, because we already have an emotional investment in the characters. The idea that the new life form would be able to communicate so clearly with humans, universal translator or no, is something of a cheat,

and the pacing isn't as tight as it could've been. Still, this one's a winner, because it takes its concept seriously from beginning to end, and because it doesn't shortcut too badly to a resolution. For all the Up With People boosterism the show displays, it's necessary to get the occasional reminder that humans can still screw up big time, and often when they're operating with the best of intentions.

Grade: B+

"Coming of Age"

Now here's something you never would've seen on *TOS*: a stop-and-smell-the-roses episode whose two major plots don't ever connect. Even more surprising, one of those plots is simply there to pique our interest, as it won't be resolved till much later in the season. That's right, "Age" has the first example of that most treacherous and wonderful of television stand-bys: the introduction of the serial narrative. Subtle or not, even if it's only relevant for a couple episodes (which is a let-down we'll discuss at another time), here we have *TNG* trying to walk on its own, and if the first steps are clumsy ones, there's still cause for excitement.

Admittedly, the clunkiness hits you right out of the gate, as the first scene features Wesley apologizing to a guy named Jake. We'll find out soon enough that Wesley beat Jake out for a chance to apply to Starfleet Academy, but without any context, the scene plays like a terribly polite break-up, with both parties trying to just shoulder through it, with arrangements to be made later as to who gets what out of the china hutch. The *Enterprise* is in orbit around Relva VII to give Wesley a chance to audition for the school of his dreams. While there, Picard gets in touch with an old friend, Admiral Gregory Quinn, but Quinn has some disturbing news. Something, he tells Picard, is "wrong" on the *Enterprise*, and an officious investigator named Remmick has been assigned by Quinn to get to the bottom of just what that "wrong" is.

The serialized elements in "Age" rest largely on the second plot. Remmick spends his time questioning crew members about earlier events, and we hear references to other episodes of the season, which is actually a lot more exciting than it sounds. Remmick is the expected irritant, the kind that used to pop on on the original series whenever Kirk had the misfortune of stopping at a starbase, but the simple acknowledgment of the past makes his

interrogations easier to bear. Riker's increased indignation is hilarious, but much of what happens here is less like a natural reaction of a well-knit crew to an outsider, and more the following of an expected set of beats. Remmick has to be overly aggressive (despite the fact that he'd be a more effective questioner if he was didn't act like a dick), and Riker has to freak out, even though the *Enterprise* is currently not really doing much of anything. What is there for Remmick to interrupt?

Oh sure, we do get one crisis, when Jake the Idjit, shamed at his rejection, steals a shuttlecraft so he can run away and join the circus, or some damn fool thing. Remmick interferes until he is yelled at, but I was too distracted by the immense stupidity of Jake's theft to care. A shuttlecraft doesn't go that fast, right? And it's not like people wouldn't notice one was missing. I'm sure it's difficult to find ways to escape a starship, but surely even a distraught, highly stressed teenager would've realized he wasn't going to get far. Ah well, maybe it was cry for help. That still doesn't explain why Picard's first action wasn't to lock on with the tractor beams. By the time the 'craft's engine stalls, it's supposedly too far out of reach for a beam, and Picard has to use some clever science to save the day. But his cleverness is undone by a lack of basic precaution. Shuttlecraft sloooooowly zooming away from you? Lock it down first, *then* ask questions.

As for Wesley, well, he gets a really standard "Chosen One goes to Hogwarts" type plot. Sure, he isn't chosen for the Academy (lord knows we couldn't stand to lose his character, as he really holds the show together), but the testing itself hits all the basics, from introducing classmates--the Potential Best Friend, the Potential Crush, the Potential Rival--and then each section unfolds roughly as these things always seem to unfold, with Wesley showing off his decency and remarkable skills at species profiling. I don't really hate the character anymore, although I still find Wheaton's "Gee whiz!" naiveté grating, so I didn't mind this. Didn't really fill me with excitement, but I didn't mind it.

Actually, I did sort of mind that Wesley is once again proven infallible. Sure, somebody else gets the slot he's trying for, but we never see Wesley actually making the mistake or getting stressed in a way that would indicate poor performance. Instead, he's always polite, always helpful, and always smarter than everybody. During the final test, we even learn that Wesley's greatest fear is having to leave a man behind to die. It's nice to get some backstory here

(turns out this is how Wesley's father died, and Picard was the leave-behinder), there's something so flat and generic about his worries and his personality that when he's not grating, he simply ceases to exist as an identifiable person. Plus, for such a supposed super genius, he's an idiot. He falls completely for a psych test so blatantly phony a toddler could've spotted it, and they eat mud.

This one is more interesting for the possibilities it represents than for the actual episode itself. Wesley's storyline is passable, but too much like a preview for a *Star Trek Babies* spin-off. Remmick's storyline has a pay-off that only leads to more questions, as Quinn explains to Picard that there's some sort of unpleasantness working its way through Starfleet high command, and he wanted to be sure Picard was on the up and up. That will be terribly exciting down the road, but for right now, it's like getting a two-parter with no "To Be Continued..." in the end credits.

Grade: C

"Heart of Glory"

Ever since the first episode, a number of crew-members on the *Enterprise* have been walking around with question marks over their heads. What's eating Tasha Yar? Where did Data come from? Why's that black guy wearing a vacuum cleaner attachment clipped over his eyes? Whither Worf? Some of these questions have been answered, and some of them have answers that are long enough to unfold whenever the writing staff hits a dry-spell, but until now, the Klingon on the bridge had been largely overlooked. Striking in size and make-up, Worf loomed and growled, but apart from a general aggressive stance, he's largely background. The guy gets a line or two per episode, may get to struggle with somebody, and then one of those jerkwad humans will remind him how civilized we all are compared to Klingons. Joy.

"Heart of Glory" works to correct that, and while the first act suffers from some drag, once the main conflict kicks in, we get a much better idea of where Worf is from, and what's driving him. Even better, the episode treats his concerns, and the concerns of the Klingons the *Enterprise* rescues off a dying cargo ship, as problems worthy of serious consideration. The Klingon hunger for battle and honor isn't treated dismissively, and given the blandly

peaceful tone of so much of what is identified as "good" on the series (I mean good in the moral sense, not the critical one), you'd expect this hunger to be roundly ridiculed and dismissed. But there's a sadness to "Glory," and while it's not exactly a tear-jerker, it allows Worf the dignity the character needs to work.

The *Enterprise* gets a distress signal from a severely damaged Talarian freighter stuck in The Neutral Zone. Picard goes in for the rescue, which indicates a slightly different approach to the Zone than *TOS* took. Somebody reports to Starfleet that they're making the move, but nobody waits for confirmation from back home that the move is permitted, so I guess it's a tricky place to be but not an absolutely verboten one? Anyway, they find the ship, and Data, Riker, and Geordi beam aboard. The episode makes a misstep here, because we spend a lot of time dealing with Geordi's visor, time that doesn't connect to anything else in "Glory," and isn't interesting enough in its own right to justify its existence.

Plus, it continues the weird thread of showing Picard some technology and having him be simply *astonished* at how *amazing* it all is. Happened in the holodeck episode, and it's happened a few times since, and here we get him being bizarrely impressed by the murky polarization effect that Geordi spends his whole life seeing. Patrick Stewart sells it because, hey, it's Patrick Stewart, and I can understand that the writers want to try and get us excited about visuals which aren't, by themselves, all that effective. Having a cast member we respect be in awe of some chintzy piece of crap forces us to at least play along that it might be cool. Really, though, Picard has gone through this rapturous state too many times to be plausible. I can believe he is a man who would love his job enough to find passion in any aspect of it. I don't believe that he would nearly wet his pants whenever somebody hooks an Atari up to the view screen.

Thankfully, this is but a detour for our larger story. There be Klingons aboard this ship--three, in fact, although one is just about dead. The trio beams back to the *Enterprise*, gives Picard a not-entirely-truthful account of their plight, and then their buddy dies, and we get to see the Klingon death ritual, which is both kind of silly (I think it's hard to yell fiercely wearing make-up and facial appliances, and in such a well-lit room), and effectively otherworldly and intense. A Klingon first stares into the eyes of his dying friend, and then, once the moment has passed, he and all

those around him shout a wordless warning to the afterlife that their comrade is coming, and the angels and demons and so forth best be on their guard.

I've talked before about how the Klingons seemed de-evolved from their generally urbane (if villainous) appearances in *TOS*, and the death ritual is a great example of how that seeming regression can work in the show's favor. With so many disparate alien races to deal with, it's useful to feature strong, identifiable cultures in order to keep everyone apart. This can backfire if the invented culture is too dismissively one note (see: the Ferengi), but the Klingons work here because they're different enough to be distinctive, but those differences aren't simply a lust for violence or constant rage. The Klingons are a classical warrior race, and while such an aggressive approach to life has to adapt over time to survive (as this episode admits), it still has a definite romantic appeal.

We see that appeal when Worf spends time with the two surviving Klingons from the freighter, Korris and Konmel. I was pleasantly surprised by these scenes. I expected that the two "untamed" Klingons would mock Worf for his Federation duds, and they do, but the mocking doesn't last very long, and Worf doesn't seem especially humiliated by it. Korris is more interested in pitching his view of life to Worf, and of winning a new follower to his cause. He explains that he and his two companions were on the run from the Klingon Empire, because they disagreed with the government's attempts at peaceful co-existence. Korris is looking for a place where he and those who felt the same as him could fight and die with honor.

It's a concept that finds a sympathetic ear in Worf, who we learn was orphaned at a young age and raised by humans. (Yeah, he's Superman. Deal.) His whole life, he's struggled with his instincts, without anyone around to explain to him how to cope, which makes him a lot more interesting than the series had ever indicated before. What's even better is that, despite the clear temptation, you never get the impression that Worf seriously considers joining up with Korris. Part of that is basic practicality, since Korris never really comes close to succeeding, but there more important angle is that Worf has committed to his role on the ship. As he explains to Korris in the episode's climax, the true test of the warrior is the battle within, and cheesy or not, it shows him in a new, and very compelling, light.

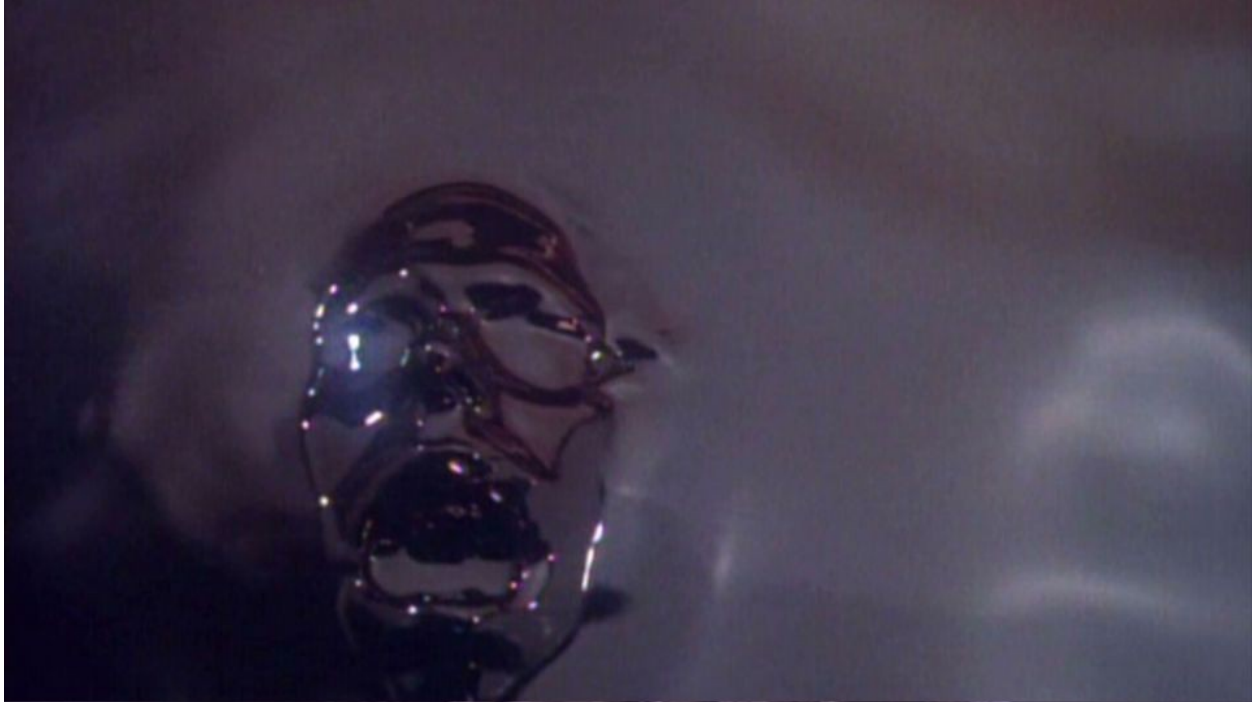
Oh, there's more plot; a Klingon ship meets the *Enterprise* and demands that Korris and Konmel be handed over for trial and execution. Yar and a security team arrest the two, and Yar nearly creates a scene when Korris encounters a young child before being taken into custody. Yar assumes a hostage situation (I understand being cautious, but the woman goes into every situation expecting the worst, and she often takes steps to ensure those expectations aren't disappointed), and Worf has to explain to her that Klingons don't take hostages. Again, Korris is a criminal, but he's sympathetic and he has a code of honor to follow. It would've been much easier to just make him an outright psychopath, but this is much more compelling, and it means that when Korris finally dies, and Worf repeats the funeral ritual, the sense of loss feels earned.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Picard really reads the riot act to Mandl and his team of misfits. "Tell them about the pattern in the sand." "Oh yes, *do* tell us." (Can't really convey it in text, but it was very funny on screen.)
- I want to start a punk band and I want to name it Ugly Bags Of Mostly Water. Who's with me?
- "It's a good thing you're cute, Wesley, or you could really be obnoxious." Okay, I'm beginning to see my problem with the character, then. (Also, "She thinks I'm cuuuuuuute!")
- "They are warning the dead, sir. Beware: a Klingon warrior is about to arrive." Hell. Yes.
- Next week, it's "The Arsenal of Freedom," "Symbiosis," "Skin of Evil."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Arsenal Of Freedom"/"Symbiosis"/"Skin Of Evil"



By [Zack Handlen](#)

May 21, 2010 10:00 AM

"The Arsenal of Freedom"

Here's a problem I'm having with *TNG*. The first season has been improving. Nothing exactly, y'know, Emmy worthy yet, but I find myself looking forward to new episodes rather than preparing for them. (Admittedly, my good will is often defeated by the second commercial break, but at least I start off in a decent mood.) The pacing is stronger, the characters are fleshing out, and it's easy to see that this is a show with potential in it. And yet a trend has developed that, if it continues, may always keep the series from being great: our heroes are too perfect.

I understand that Gene Roddenberry wanted a utopian future, but dramatically speaking, that doesn't work, because it means that all conflict becomes external. Every week, a new threat presents itself, and every week, Picard and the rest band together, plan their options, and behave accordingly. It's--well, okay, I'm not saying no storyteller has ever used this approach. But it's shallow and strangely smug, like a filmstrip on proper hygiene and grooming. We care

about characters when we can relate to them, and it's hard to relate to someone who's never selfish, never gets angry when they shouldn't, never wants what they can't have.

Take "Arsenal Of Freedom." It's a mediocre riff on the sci-fi staple, "the perfect weapon," featuring a planet where all intelligent life has been destroyed because everybody went to bed one night and forgot about Off switches. There are all kinds of problems, the biggest being that the episode doesn't really have a third act, but the moral superiority of the crew is on full display, and it's frustrating. "Freedom" is a fable about the dangers of the arm's race (although here it's not so much a race as a really aggressive game of solitaire), and how the ultimate killing machine would be really, really good at killing. That's fine. But this isn't a lesson the heroes need to learn. Not a single crew-member expresses a desire to see these amazing weapon systems, or suggests outfitting the *Enterprise* with some high tech equipment, which reduces the conflict to simple black and white.

The plot is straightforward, and, getting past the didacticism, creepy: the *USS Drake* disappeared in the Lorzeno Cluster while investigating Minos, home of what had formerly been the galaxy's foremost weapons manufacturers. The *Enterprise* is sent in to investigate, and an away team made up of Riker, Yar, and Data learn that things on the planet are very bad indeed. Paul Rice, captain of the *Drake* and a former friend of Riker's, appears and starts asking pointed questions--except it's not Rice, but a hologram. The *Drake* has been destroyed, and its crew dead, and the reason this is unsettling is that it all happens off-screen and the viewer is forced to draw their own conclusions.

Those conclusions aren't difficult to arrive at, but the fact that an entire ship could be blown up by what amounts to a computer error is effective enough in making the point. Our toys sometimes have minds of their own, and when we design those toys for murdering people, well, things can get out of hand fast.

As they do here. Riker gets enveloped in an energy field, Picard and Beverly beam down to lend a hand (in both this episode and "Skin of Evil," you'll notice that the show mostly ignores the supposed necessity of keeping the captain out of harm's way), Data and Yar manage to bust Riker free but then things get worse. Beverly and Picard wind up in a pit together, and Yar, Data, and Riker are forced to face off against a series of opponents who keep getting smarter. Meanwhile back on the *Enterprise*, Geordi is in command, and he's got problems of his own: a machine is

attacking the ship, and it's impossible to beam the away team back without lowering the shields and leaving everyone vulnerable to attack.

The Picard/Beverly subplot isn't bad, mostly because the actors are effective (really, I could spend each week turning this into the Patrick Stewart Appreciation Society), but because of the cutting to other story-lines, the potential for claustrophobia and emotional intimacy is largely squandered. The fact that the killing drones learn from their mistakes is intriguing (and will be put to much better use when the Borg show up), but it's used here as a narrative dead end, creating suspense by implying that an undefeatable threat will soon arrive, and then defeating that threat in the most mundane manner imaginable.

Geordi's mini-arc could've been good, because it nearly addresses the concern I mentioned above. Geordi is put into a highly stressful situation, he's got the head of engineering telling him he's made the wrong choice (the best part is when La Forge decides to follow the jerk's advice, only to have the jerk *immediately* question the wisdom of choosing a course he himself said was necessary), and he's never been captain during a battle. And yet, Jerk-Face aside, it's all hugs and sunshine. Troi reassures him he's doing a great job, reminds him to encourage the newer staff (which, honestly, it seemed like he was already doing), and everything is aces.

Then there's the ending. We get another hologram, this one of basset-faced Vincent Schiavelli, so that's nice. But all it takes to shut down the system is saying, "Sure, we'll buy this." No re-wiring of circuitry, no re-programming, no explosions. Which makes you wonder how this civilization died out in the first place. Were wires crossed? Did they all start stabbing each other, just to see if they'd bleed? Who knows. We all know the moral to this story anyway. It would've been nice if we'd had at least a little discussion, though. On *TOS*, Kirk, Spock, and McCoy would've hashed out the appeal of an unbeatable weapon as well as its drawbacks. Here, we're all supposed to know that violence begets violence, and that's it.

Grade: C+

"Symbiosis"

Now this is more interesting.

The Prime Directive is a non-interference rule, because if there's anything that stories tell us, it's don't get involved. (Except for those times when you should. Or those times when you should get a little involved, but hey, let's not get crazy and go buy-the-whole-house committed.) When you interact with others, you create uncertainty. The better you know the people you interact with, the more you can hope to control that uncertainty, but it's not always possible to vet your encounters ahead of time. The girl at the grocery story won't respond to my letters, but I have to keep buying rat poison and toothpaste. That's why we have a society--it gives us rules and boundaries for when we deal with strangers, and provides us with reasonable expectations for how those dealings should go. It's not perfect, but it's better than nothing, and it's definitely better than facing a group or race that doesn't share any of the same values. That's gotten everyone into enough trouble on *this* planet, and when you consider that our differences, on the whole, are remarkably small, it gives you chills to imagine how rough it'd be trying to find common ground with, say, an alien life that communicates via weather patterns.

That's where the Prime Directive comes in. It makes the kind of exploration that Picard and his team routinely engage in possible, because without it, the Federation would nearly always be at war with someone. It also works as a convenient hook to hang a plot on, since it basically takes the entire *Enterprise* out of the equation. There are a lot of reasons why *TOS* kept giving us god-like entities, but I'm betting one was that it's a pain in the ass to keep inventing on-planet threats that would really make someone with the power of a space ship at their backs all that concerned. The god-like entities have been few and far between this season of *TNG*, so we've had more problems that could've been solve via phaser or photo torpedo. That's too easy, so we need some reason not to just get up in everybody's grill with our superior technology, and that's where the Directive comes in.

"Symbiosis" is an interesting case, because it's the first time I can remember Picard (or Kirk) actually using the PD to manipulate a situation to his liking. If you'd asked me which *Trek* captain I preferred before I watched *TOS*, I would've said Picard, and it's episodes like this that still gave him an edge. While Shatner was well-cast as Kirk, and I don't think anyone else could've done the role as well as he did, Patrick Stewart is an undeniably better actor,

capable of multiple shadings on a single line, and more than talented enough to rise above the material when necessary. I wouldn't say he's holding the show together, but *TNG* simply would not work without him. He makes all this silliness plausible. Beyond Stewart's talent, though, is the fact that Picard has more careful, thoughtful approach to his job.

That shows here. The *Enterprise* rescues some people off a damaged freighter. There's a lot of shouting and back and forth: on one side, there're Ornarans, who desperately need a drug called felicium to combat a plague that's laid waste to their world, and on the other, there's the Brekans, whose entire culture is devoted to producing felicium for the Ornarans, in exchange for the goods and materials they need to survive. Not just survive--the Brekans we meet are clearly wealthy, while the two Ornarans are, well, hicks. (One of whom is played Merritt Butrick, aka David Marcus, aka Kirk's son.) It's a curious set up, and it's difficult to imagine an entire planet devoted to the production of a single good, especially considering how frankly inept the Ornarans seem. What does it benefit the Brekans to have a race of decent but dull-witted serfs who all live across the solar system? If the plumbing backs up, you'd be better off moving than waiting for a house call.

This, like "Arsenal," is allegory, so it helps to give them a little leeway in terms of common sense. The twist, which Beverly uncovers soon enough, is that the "plague" the Ornarans suffer from is nothing more than the agonies of withdrawal. The actual disease was cured two centuries ago, but the Brekans, learning what a cash cow a planet full of junkies could be, refined the felicium to increase its addictive properties, all the while selling the lie that the plague could only be cured by regular doses of happy pills. Again, this doesn't really work. It's been two hundred years, and in all that time, we're supposed to believe that no one on Ornara went without felicium, either by accident or suicidal impulse or sheer stubbornness, long enough to realize they were being had? I realize that pushees aren't really the best long-term planners, but surely mere happenstance would've shown them the truth at some point, unless members of their government were in on the con. (This is never indicated.) Besides, how productive can a society of people aching for their next fix really be? They may have some great rock bands, but their practical industries must be in a shambles, and it's hard to imagine them capable of keeping their own kind alive, let alone keeping Breka afloat.

Again, though, allegory, and while the scenario could've used refinement, it does have an effectively cynical bite. Beverly, who serves as the audience stand-in, is outraged at her discovery, and begs Picard to help the Ornarans, especially once Picard determines that the Brekans are running the con on purpose. But his hands are tied. He was barely able to justify saving Welsey from Planet Fredericks of Hollywood, so how can he justify interfering here when none of his own crew is in danger? We spend the whole episode half-convinced he'll leave the situation exactly as it is, and that's essentially what he does. It's the *way* he does it that counts. The Ornarans aren't great mechanics, and some solar flare activity is wrecking havoc with their freighter engines. The parts needed to fix the ships were readily available on the *Enterprise*, and Picard had been initially willing to provide them, but in the end, he refuses, citing the PD. This means that the Ornarans can't fix their freighters, which means they can't send payment to the Brekans, which means the parasitic relationship is over.

We could quibble over details, but Picard gives what appears to the Ornarans to be a death sentence for their whole world; and while it's not quite so bad as that, he did just damn the lot of them to months of painful, panicked detoxification. If it'd been Kirk, there would've been punching, and he almost certainly would've forced the Brekans to reveal their treachery. Picard's solution is subtler, more calculated, and, arguably, more effective. He's not giving them the truth, he's just making the lie impossible, and all without violating the Prime Directive. "Symbiosis" has some problems, but Stewart shines, and he even manages to make a lecture to Beverly in the turbo-lift thrilling. (Sadly, "lecture in the turbo-lift" is not a euphemism.) There's a victory here, but it's not without cost, and just knowing the thousands who will be cursing Picard's name in the near future gives the conclusion real weight.

Grade: B

"Skin of Evil"

I've been making jokes about Tasha Yar's exit from *TNG* since my first recap, and I'm not going to tell you I'm sad to see her go. I'm not happy, though, not like I expected I'd be. While Yar was never in danger of becoming a favorite character, she did get increasingly inoffensive as time passed, and in "Skin," I'd go so far as to say she was likable.

TV shows can deal with character deaths in all kinds of ways, and I was not expecting the out-of-nowhere approach we got here. If you'd asked me beforehand, I would've guessed that Yar would sacrifice herself to save her friends, because it seems like that's how *TNG* works. This isn't a gritty crime drama, it's nihilistic or intentionally cruel, and it isn't actively trying to undercut how we watch and appreciate stories. Everyone goes to great lengths to comment on nearly every significant event, but while we do get a (fairly uncomfortable) wake scene for Yar, her actual demise is what I'd call shockingly unshocking. It just sort of--happens.

I remember getting into an argument last season of *House*, when a character committed suicide between episodes. It didn't work because it was too abrupt and out of context, but some commenters argued that suicide (and, by extension, death) is like that. It can just happen, without any way of predicting it. Art isn't life, though, no matter how thoroughly it's deconstructed, and whenever a story kills someone, that death needs to make sense within the world of the story. The suicide on *House* had the cast talking about how senseless it was, but the decision had been motivated by the actor's departure from the show, and not part of the plot, and it played out that way. I can imagine situations in which in an abrupt death like this character's *could've* worked, but on *House*, it was a cheap gimmick, on show which relies increasingly on shock value hold its audience's interest.

Yar's death isn't nearly as bizarre. I can't imagine how it played at the time. We know now that no other major cast member will die during the show's run, which means this isn't a daring raising of stakes or a way to show that everyone's in danger. It's more about junking an actress, and while I'll give them credit for trying to create a memorable murderer, well, that credit only goes so far. Yar's death manages to be both too sudden and too drawn out, and it's still the only interesting aspect of a disappointingly crummy hour.

Deanna Troi's shuttlecraft crash lands on Vagra II, and debris makes it impossible for the *Enterprise* to beam her back to safety. Riker leads an away team to the planet, but they find their way to the shuttlecraft blocked by what looks like a pool of oil. They try to walk around the pool, it follows them, and, after they debate their options for a while, the oil starts talking. It's a monster named Armus, and it's, well, remember the title? Yar decides to push ahead anyway, and Armus knocks her back with some kind of energy blast, killing her.

It's just so odd. We've seen characters take similar hits on the show before, and those were never fatal. There's no real sense of serious peril before the event, and while Armus looks spooky, once he starts talking, he sounds like a Saturday morning cartoon. (Imagine how much better this episode would've been if it hadn't talked at all? Sure, you would've lost Troi's heart-to-hearts with the creature--yeah, I'm definitely not seeing a downside here.) That should make the sudden fatality startling, and I'm guessing when this first aired, it blew some minds. Hell, they even bring Yar back to the *Enterprise* for medical treatment, despite Beverly declaring her dead at the scene, and she still doesn't make it. The problem, I think, isn't so much how the death itself plays out. It's that, as a plot twist, it really doesn't fit in the world of *TNG*. It has an immediacy that the show can't support, and that makes a sequence that doesn't really resonate with the rest of the episode. Murdering Yar should make Armus seem much more dangerous, but he's just so whiny and petulant and bland that he could've killed half a dozen cast members without leaving an impression.

It's unsurprising, then, that "Skin" never clicks. It should be unbelievable suspenseful. We've got one regular crew-member in serious danger, another one dead to prove the danger isn't funning around, and we've got a monster, a flat-out, you-can't-solve-this-one-through-friendship monster. But there's too much here that doesn't work to build an effectively mounting dread. Riker getting pulled into the oil? That works. Troi endlessly discussing its "emptiness"? Gah, shut up shut up shut *up*. Armus's origin is ridiculous--he's all the bad vibes siphoned off of a race that abandoned him--and he's a waste of effects work. Picard defeats him by talking to him for a bit, which is cute, but mostly you're just happy to leave the thing behind. (Why the hell Picard beams down in the first place is beyond me. Time and again, we've had the crew resist putting him in harm's way. Did he decide to take a mini-vacation once Yar, Troi, and Riker were off the bridge?)

Then there's Yar's memorial service, which is awful. Apparently Yar was so morbid she took to recording a holographic version of herself to say goodbye to her friends, and the goodbyes are just specific enough that you wonder how often she re-recorded. (Which would retroactively make her much more interesting than she ever was on the show, come to think.) She doesn't make any direct mention of her and Data's "together time," although she tells him he sees things with the "wonder of a child," so I guess they played dress-up. Y'know, during. If her initial

exit was oddly out of place, this overlong exit is fitting for a show that still hasn't reached a comfortable relationship with sentimentality, expecting us to be saddened by the loss of an acquaintance we hardly noticed. The only thing that saves it from being a complete waste is Picard. His "Au revoir, Tasha," is a mournful, dignified goodbye. It might not've been earned, but I can't deny its sincerity.

Grade: C-

Stray Observations:

- Tasha makes actual security recommendations in "Arsenal." She really did have a purpose!
- After Yar's death, Worf is upgraded to head of security, and watching him consciously choose to stay behind for tactical reasons was a strong character beat. He's becoming a favorite, whenever they remember to give him lines.
- Notice how when he inspires his crew, Geordi only gives a reassuring pat to the *female* crew-member. Slick.
- Oh, the Ornarans and the Bekans have electricity powers. It's not really relevant.
- Armus calls Data "tin man." I had no idea *Oz* references were a galactic standard.
- Next week, we finish out the season with "We'll Always Have Paris," "Conspiracy," and "The Neutral Zone."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "We'll Always Have Paris"/"Conspiracy"/"The Neutral Zone"



By [Zack Handlen](#)

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"We'll Always Have Paris"

Our first time travel episode! *And* we get some Picard backstory, and a mad scientist. By all rights, it should be terrific, but this is the first season, so we're not quite ready for "terrific" just yet. The seeds are there, and the scenes of the episode that fully embrace the possibilities are an exciting presage of stories to come. It's just too bad, then, that between those scenes we get some undercooked romance, and a script that's willing to raise questions without really following through on them. More than anything, it plays like a rough draft, tossing around possibilities but lacking in the craft to tie them together properly.

"Paris" opens with Picard fencing against an unnamed lieutenant. We've been getting occasional glimpses of Picard's personal life over the course of the season, and this one's probably the longest sustained character beat. It's plot important, but not for obvious reasons; Picard doesn't end up having to defend himself against a time anomaly with

nothing but an epee. Instead, we get to see a brief time loop, as the two characters exchange dialog, the screen goes fuzzy, and then they repeat exchange. It's a moderate glitch notable because of the lack of context surrounding it. Mostly, this is just a scene to give us a clearer understanding of Picard's approach to combat (it's not exactly subtle, but contrast this with the wrestling lessons Kirk gave in "Charlie X"), and have us thinking of him as a person, and not just a captain.

As for the time blip itself, it's effective because there's no expectation on the series for that kind of trickery. As for the time blip itself, it's effective because there's no expectation on the series for that kind of trickery. There's more recursion to come, and it's creatively done, even if the pay-off doesn't entirely live up to expectations. It's fun to see Picard, Data, and Riker run into themselves, but what's even more exciting is the possibilities this opens up for later seasons. On *TOS*, we had the occasional duplicates, through transporter malfunction and parallel universes, but we never had this willingness to play around with basic structural assumptions. How weird is the scene when Picard and the others meet themselves on the turbolift? Even better, we start following the group that enters the lift, but then shift our attention to the group waiting to get on, creating a brief feeling of temporal disorientation. And the finale, with Data having to negotiate multiple versions of himself in order to stabilize the anomaly, is also nifty, although over too quickly. I've always loved time travel episodes because I love the possibility of weirdness, of playing games with our accepted concept of how a story will unfold, and "Paris" scratches the surface. It makes me want more, but at least now I know there's a surface to be scratched.

As for the rest of it, well, I wasn't a fan. Picard reacts strongly when he hears an emergency transmission from a Dr. Paul Manheim. Manheim is married to a former flame of Picard's--the good captain abandoned her in a cafe in Paris years and years ago, and is now feeling all nostalgic about leaving her behind. He even re-creates the setting on the holodeck, to once again impress us with the computer's astonishingly vast resources, as well as remind us that whenever people aren't wearing uniforms on *TNG*, they look very, very silly. Troi, in one of her less helpful moments, tells Picard she senses an intensity of emotion in him, and offers counseling. There's something very off-putting about this, although that might just be my own damage talking--I can understand Troi's value when dealing with strange species (although do they ever address the possibilities that different races may have different emotional

responses? Is "secrecy" translatable?), and also as an on-board therapist, but for her to go out of her way to poke people is, well, irritating. Picard hasn't shown poor judgment yet, and he never actually makes a bad call the entire episode. Sometimes preventative care can go too far.

Then again, this could just be another indicator of how stable and sane everyone is in the future, because Picard certainly doesn't take offense at Troi's questions. "Paris" could've benefited from a little more rawness, I think. It sets us up for an emotionally complicated reunion, but Picard's scenes with Jenice are middling at best. Stewart is charming, but Jenice (Michelle Phillips, from the Mamas and the Papas) is uninteresting and, at times, actively annoying, fixating on her and Picard's history even while her husband lays near death in sick bay, and the whole universe is in danger from her husband's experiments. Thematically, the relationship here makes sense: the episode is about the past regurgitating itself after all, and trying to give us a more personal connection to that regurgitation by reminding us why it's usually better for the past to stay dead makes sense. Unfortunately, the relationship is too bland, and the actress too banal, for that connection to have any weight. Instead, it plays like what it essentially is: filler.

As for Manheim's experiments, we're faced with a distinct lack of follow-through. He's trying to disconnect himself from the natural flow of time in order to make contact with other dimensions. Which isn't, y'know, evil or anything, but considering the cost of his first real success--the death of much of his team, and a disturbance whose affect can be felt light years away--why isn't anyone more concerned at his state plans to push forward? There's no clear gain, apart from discovery, and the risks are enormous. He's managed to do what no one else in history has accomplished, and not in a "Oh hey, sliced bread!" kind of way. *TNG*'s brand of utopia can be bland and dramatically flat, but every so often, it exposes a blind side that's almost astonishingly short-sighted. No one expresses concern that Manheim might somehow create a rift that causes more serious damage that can be fixed via android. No one says, "So why, exactly, are you risking the Billy Pilgrim-ization of the galaxy?" It's just smiles and hugs and warm appreciation. I'm all for science, but I also have a certain fondness for cause-and-effect, and, were I on the *Enterprise*, I would've made a case for making sure they stayed in that order.

Grade: B-

"Conspiracy"

Apart from the pilot and "Skin of Evil," this may be the only first season episode I had clear memories of coming in to this project. It's a very hard episode to forget, and it's often singled out as one of the high points of the season. I can see why: it's exciting, scary, and much, much grosser than anything else we've ever seen on the show. (Including Data's "fully functional" and that shirt Riker wore in "Angel One.") It's striking, ambitious, and there's no secondary plot to distract us from the main concerns. And yet, watching it again now, I don't think it's quite as good as I remembered. It shows some of the same problems we've seen throughout the first season, and often plot logic is sacrificed in the name of "oh cool!" moments. Most importantly, "Conspiracy" doesn't really *fit*. It's a bold experiment, but it reaches too far, and makes it more difficult to support.

Picard gets a special super-secret message from Walker, an old friend (thankfully not a ranger of any kind), and Walker wants to meet up. Walker seems troubled, and when Picard arrives at the rendezvous point, he has to pass an interrogation to prove he's himself, much to his frustration. It's a familiar scene, with lots of memory checks and bluffs, but Walker goes to surprising lengths to make absolutely sure Picard is trustworthy, before explaining the problem: something's wrong with Starfleet. It's the same vague "something" that Quinn talked about all the way back in "Coming of Age," but the danger has increased. Orders are being sent to consolidate power and put key personnel in harm's way, all with a subtlety and deftness that indicates infiltration at the highest levels of power. Walker, and the people he trusts (including Michael Berryman, from *The Hills Have Eyes*), want to put a stop to this, but they aren't quite sure how. Then Walker's ship gets blown up with him on it.

Clearly, we're dealing with some raised stakes. The idea of a vast secret organization gnawing at the heart of the Federation is intriguing, and Walker's paranoia about Picard makes it difficult to dismiss his concerns. The problem is, it's all so sudden that it's hard to really grasp the full implications of the problem. We've had a bare minimum of dealings with Starfleet personnel; Picard explains this by saying the *Enterprise* has been at the outer rim for a while, and that's fine, but it also means that this new development is less like a twist on our expectations than it is like walking into another story that's already three-quarters finished. We know the situation is dangerous for our heroes, because Walker dies, and that's serious, but beyond a few comments, it's difficult to feel the weight of the danger the

system is in. When Picard beams down to Starfleet Headquarters--and by the way, for all his intelligence, Picard makes an incredibly stupid call here--he just happens to beam into the head group of the conspiracy, and they immediately go to work on him. All that careful world-building the season has been working towards gets tossed aside in favor of a bunch of smirking old guys who eat worms.

It would also be nice if the threat wasn't quite so idiotic. Quinn, who's been infected by the alien parasite that's causing all these problems, beams aboard the *Enterprise* intending to get the infection ball rolling. He gets into a fight with Riker, which makes no sense; if these creatures are such experts at staying undetected, surely they would realize that picking a fight with a ship's first officer isn't the best way to go about a secret invasion? Wouldn't it have made more sense to find a way to beam aboard a mess of the parasites and then let *them* do all the heavy lifting of infiltration? Quinn acts like he just wishes he had a mustache to stroke. He manages to put Riker down, and nearly takes out the security team Riker calls to his aid (note how the "team" is just Geordi and Worf. I'd like to think rank means privileges like, "Taking a distress call seriously enough to send more than two guys," but apparently not), so I guess his plan is sort of working. Although he seems to only have the one bug, so was he planning on killing the two people he couldn't infect? It's irrelevant, anyway, since Beverly arrives to save the day with a phaser.

Back on the planet, Picard is hanging out at a Bond Villain Convention, suffering through some painfully wink-heavy dialog. ("What do you know about conspiracies, Picard, eh? Eh? Do you like gladiator movies? Would you enjoy having a pink dung beetle shoved down your throat and affixed to your spine? But perhaps I've said too much...") It's too blatant, but still creepy, and there's something thrilling in seeing the supposed symbols of authority turn malevolent. The dinner sequence that follows is nightmarish, and I give "Conspiracy" all due credit for its willingness to embrace the unpleasantness. A group of old men eating maggots is icky enough, but the truly unsettling element here is the way the dominant group shifts our expectations of what's "acceptable." Picard isn't just seeing his friends and colleagues behaving strangely, he's watching some of his most trusted assumptions of how life works throw into question, and it's deeply unnerving.

Then Riker shows up with a fake bug tail sticking out of his neck for street cred. Again we witness first hand the invaders' imbecility, as the fake infection is immediately trusted, and Riker manages to hold the con just long

enough to start firing phasers. (Anybody else think it would've been cooler if he'd actually eaten some maggots?)

The dinner scene is "Conspiracy"'s first big set-piece, and its second follows soon after, as Picard and Riker track down the head of the colony, disguised in the body of poor old interrogating Remmick. (I'm assuming Remmick was "himself" in "Coming of Age," which makes him a minor tragic figure. Sure, he was a jerk while he was questioning everyone, but his enthusiasm and appreciation for the *Enterprise* at the end of that episode gave him just enough humanity to make me sorry to see him die.) There's a brief, villainous exchange, and then Riker and Picard open fire--and Remmick's *head explodes*. Not just that, either: his whole torso bursts, and we see the giant mother bug sitting in his chest.

There's nothing like that in the rest of the season, nothing to prepare you for it, and I think that's part of the reason why people speak so highly of "Conspiracy." I think that isolation is a drawback, though. The episode should serve as a culmination of a variety of incidents, but instead plays like a one-off, which robs it of most of its potential power. The ending, which implies that the Remmick bug was able to send a message home before dying, has been criticized for never being brought up again, and that's reasonable, but the show really isn't ready for this kind of story yet. Like the bugs themselves, this is one that works on the spine, but that's as far as it goes. So hurrah for raised stakes, and fingers crossed that next time we encounter a danger this sinister, the writers know how to handle it.

Grade: B

"The Neutral Zone"

Speaking of handling things... Whatever my concerns with it, I do think "Conspiracy" should've been the last episode of the season. While the tone may have been off (it's one of the few *Trek* episodes I can think of that treats an alien race as completely, inarguably monstrous), it's a memorable, risky piece of work, and the ending naturally leaves enough unanswered questions to encourage people to return for season two. In fact, before getting started on these recaps, I'd long assumed "Conspiracy" *was* the finale, so when I realized there was another episode left to watch before moving to the next set, I was curious. "Neutral Zone" brought up no memories from me, apart from

what I knew about the Zone itself from *TOS*, but given that we'd been told the Federation hasn't had contact with the Romulans in half a century, there were some possibilities here.

Then came that moment. If you've watched a show before, you'll have certain episodes that don't sit right with you, and when you go in for a re-watch, you can forget just what those episodes were... until That Moment. Here, it's Data and Worf stumbling across a bunch of cryonic tubes. Most of the bodies inside are long rotted away to nearly nothing, but the android and the Klingon (coming this fall to NBC) find three viable human bodies--and I realized what was coming next, and I kind of wanted to give up the whole project.

This isn't the worst episode of the season, but it may possibly be the most frustrating, because it has two storylines. One follows the *Enterprise's* investigation into the destruction of multiple Federation outposts along the Neutral Zone. The suspicion is that the Romulans are involved, but there's no confirmation of this, because, again, nobody has any idea what the Romulans are up to at this point. This leads to a lot of discussion, and it's the kind of discussion I'm really coming to appreciate on *TNG*, the debates between officers on the best course of action which lack the heated name-calling aspect that so often undermined attempts at reasonableness in *TOS*. I enjoy watching smart people decide what to do next, and these scenes really work to the show's advantage, because while not everybody gets a line, it does seem like everyone's *participating*. Contrast that to similar scenes in *TOS*, where you get the feeling that Sulu is only in the room to fill a chair.

It's not incredibly powerful, but it's solid, and definitely enough to hang an episode on. Sadly, though, there's another plot in "Zone," and it has to do with those bodies Data and Worf discovered. Beverly brings them back to life, and what follows is a lot of extremely painful comic relief, as three citizens of the 21st century try and adjust to life in the 24th. There are... oh god, there *comedy music cues*. Because the jokes are so subtle, we have to highlight them. Augh.

I tend to have strong emotional reactions while I'm watching a show, and those reactions aren't always the easiest thing to remember when it comes time to write these reviews. So, looking back, I can't completely recapture just how vehemently opposed I was to Rich Guy, Housewife, and Texan (they get names, but they don't deserve them),

but I do know their segments kept threatening to throw the episode completely off the rails. Fish-out-of-water storylines are used and re-used in genre fiction, because they offer an easy way to deliver exposition. Obviously we don't really need exposition at this point with the *TNG*-universe, or at least not the kind of shallow, first contact style exposition our three stooges get. The other reason to use fish-out-of-water is to throw the main characters into sharper contrast. We get a clearer sense of how Picard and the rest operate if we see them through someone else's eyes.

Weirdly enough, that doesn't happen here either. We do get reminded again of how neat all the technology is, and how nobody uses money anymore, and how pathetic and foolish everyone in the past must've been, but it's all information we already know. Rich Guy is an irritant who keeps trying to order people around, which is about as funny as it sounds, and Texan is a former musician who takes a liking to Data and slaps Beverly on the ass, which is even less funny than it sounds. RG does get a little redemption when he tries to explain to Picard why he's so frustrated--and hell, he even busts onto the bridge and does Deanna Troi's job for her, odd as that sounds. The Housewife is, astonishingly, the weepy one of the group. Troi helps her track down some of her descendants, which makes logical sense, at least.

There's no reason to tell this story that I can see, though. None of these characters rise much above their stereotype, and the series doesn't have the dramatic weight to really do this kind of thing right. Hell, the first episode of *Futurama* managed a similar plot with more emotional depth. These are people we'll never see again. They get the bare minimum of arc, and then they're dumped off on another ship, and there's no satisfying resolution or knowledge gained.

This is doubly painful because the other plot--you know, the whole thing about outposts and Romulans--is so much more interesting, to the point where every time we cut away to follow up on the latest antics from traumatic triumvirate, it's actively painful. It's terrific seeing Picard decide to take a more peaceful approach to a potentially deadly enemy, and how much that approach pays off. The actors playing the Romulans aren't very good, but Picard's conversation with them is pretty cool. And after all that build up, and the discovery that the Romulans weren't responsible for the destroyed outposts--that, in fact, the Romulans have suffered their own mysterious losses--the

episode ends with the question unanswered. Picard says something about "more work to be done," and that's the final note of the season. The main problem of the episode is unresolved, and while that could've worked dramatically (especially after something like "Conspiracy," which implies there's all sorts of nasty happenings we don't know about or understand), it instead feels like we just ran out of time. Which makes all those precious minutes squandered on the human popsicles that much more infuriating.

Grade: C-

That's it for season one. Overall, I don't think it was quite as terrible as I was expecting, but if this was as good as the show ever got, I don't think we'd still be talking about it today. So far, we've had a definite downturn in the number of GLB ("god-like beings"), an increased sense of community aboard the *Enterprise*, and a lot of unfocused third acts. The cast is likable enough that I want to see more from them, and the growing emphasis on Picard's more deliberate approach to captaining has helped to establish *TNG* as its own show. It still hasn't lived up to the original series, but it no longer feels like it's trying to simply re-copy the old magic, and that's promising. Still, we've got a long way to go. Fingers crossed for Season 2.

Season One: C+

Stray Observations:

- Jenice to Picard, "This is not how I imagined seeing you again." Yes, I'm sure you didn't expect to run into an ex-lover who beamed you aboard his ship after your husband broke the laws of time and space and nearly killed himself. Maybe now isn't the best time to mention it, though, seeing as your ailing husband is two feet behind you.
- After the mother bug is killed in "Conspiracy," all the infected are immediately cured. I guess the bugs operate on the *Lost Boys* approach to monster societies.

- I was really hoping somebody was going to connect these mind bugs with the one Khan used in *Star Trek II*.
- Next week, we begin the second season with "The Child," "Where The Silence Has Lease," and "Elementary, Dear Data."

SEASON TWO



By [Zack Handlen](#)

Jun 3, 2010 10:00 AM

"The Child"

Welcome to season 2 of *TNG*. Like any growing show, this one has been going through some changes. You'll notice hair that wasn't there before, like Riker's smirk-enhancing beard, and new responsibilities, like Geordi's promotion to Chief Engineer. (Which means we finally have a regular in the role, so I can stop writing down a new name each week and then forgetting to cite it.) We also have ourselves two brand new cast members: Whoopi Goldberg as the wise bartender Guinan (oh hey, the *Enterprise* has a restaurant!) and Diana Muldaur as Dr. Katherine Pulaski. Guinan dispenses easy-going guidance in "Child," and Goldberg is pleasantly restrained in the role. Pulaski, on the other hand...

Look, there's no getting around it: she's a horrible character, and a huge misstep for a fledgling series whose misstep budget is already well into the red. I'm crossing my fingers that she'll develop some depth as the season progresses

(as others have mentioned, I remember her and Worf having fun scenes together), but for right now, she's miserable, poorly cast, painfully written, and quite possibly the worst possible choice to replace the smart, passionate, and sensible Beverly Crusher. Muldaur isn't a terrible actress. She's more professional than Crosby was, and there's none of that off-putting skittishness. The problem is, her persona is detached, icy, and aloof, and we're given no reason to think there's anything underlying all that condescension.

Even her introduction starts on the wrong foot. Instead of reporting to Picard as ordered when she first arrives on the ship, Pulaski goes to Ten-Forward, where off-screen she meets Deanna Troi, and learns about Troi's surprise pregnancy. (...yeah, we'll get to that.) Now, typically, this sort of ignoring-standard-protocol behavior would be indicative of a down-to-earth, irascible personality, like McCoy from *TOS*. If you go by the script as written, that's clearly the intent here. Pulaski doesn't play by the rules, but she cares about her patients, and is willing to stand up to any authority to defend those rights. It's not perfect(her conversations with Data are poorly constructed in any context), but at least there's some sense of how she could fit into the existing cast.

Muldaur ruins it because she has no warmth, and this kind of role *has* to be warm. McCoy was a bigoted ass at times, but he was passionate, and it was clear that passion, not calculation, was what drove him. Muldaur plays Pulaski like a librarian who would enjoy her work so much more if everyone stopped reading. It is a joyless, embarrassed turn, and given how cheerily enthusiastic every other cast member is, very out of place. Maybe the idea was to provide some balance for all the smiling. Often characters who stand out from the norm are break-out roles on shows, like Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory* or, hell, Spock from *TOS*. These figures provide points of identification for audiences who also often feel at odds from the rest of society. I can't imagine anyone relating to Pulaski, though, for the simple fact that if you did, why would you still be watching *TNG*?

I'll save discussing her mistreatment of Data for later(although the scene where she mispronounces his name and then mocks him for correcting her is a treasure for the ages), though, because as badly judged as Pulaski is in this episode, the story is probably worse. The MacGuffin about a plasma plague is fine, and should've been the main focus. It falls into the hard sci-fi category, and the tensest moments in "The Child" come when that situation

balances on the edge of getting completely out of hand. It's too bad, then, that this isn't called "The Perilous Plasmatic Perplexity." (Really, really too bad.) Instead, we get the Troi's unwanted pregnancy and the Space Baby.

A dot of light jumps aboard the *Enterprise*, does some zinging around the halls, and finally finds Deanna Troi, asleep in her bed. There's no other way to describe it: Tinkerbell knocks Troi up. *Trek* has never been exactly female-friendly, but for all its tasteful presentation, this has to be a low-point. Even though she should be the central focus of the episode (it is, after all, her womb), Troi is essentially passive. Other characters discuss how to handle her pregnancy while barely acknowledging her presence in the room (reminds me of a similar scene in the original *Dawn Of The Dead*, but there it was *supposed* to be creepy), and when she finally does voice an opinion, it's to state unequivocally that she's keeping the "baby." Never mind that the pregnancy is an invasion of her privacy and rights, never mind that her sudden determination to protect her mystery guest could come at the cost of great physical danger (Betazoids have ten month terms. This kid is out in three days. Don't sci-fi writers realize how much that would hurt?), it's beautiful because she's gonna be a mom now, and that's clearly the greatest gift anyone could ever have.

This is bunk. It's not bunk that Troi is enthusiastic--the Space Baby (who quickly becomes the Space Toddler, and then the Space Third Grader) could be manipulating her emotions in order to provide itself with an accommodating host. What's bunk is that the episode treats this as an unquestioned positive. Picard has his suspicions, but the birth scene is presented as a comedy (Data says silly things! Pulaski is bothered by the security team!) and the STG's eventual exit is intended as a moment of great beauty. What it translates to is: an alien hitches a ride without permission, rapes a woman, knocks her up, saddles her with grotesque body changes, attaches itself to her post-birth to gain information, endangers everyone on board the ship with its thoughtless selfishness, and then orchestrates an exit in the most emotionally manipulative fashion possible by forcing its "mother" to witness the death of her child. That's not how it's presented, of course. It's presented as a joyous life experience, but no amount of tears and lies make this anything less than a travesty.

Grade: D+

"Where Silence Has Lease"

Speaking of information gathering...

Man, I love that title. That's classic *TOS* titular-poetry right there. And this is a very *TOS*-style episode, as it's back to the God-like beings and technology-indistinguishable-from-magic storytelling. It's better than "The Child," because there's no vaguely sleazy exploitive angle ("The Child" goes out of its way to avoid exploitation, but it plays like a Merchant Ivory production of a V.C. Andrews novel), and because we get some intriguing plot hooks, but when you get past the shiny moments, this is a tale we've seen before. Whether or not you enjoy it hinges largely on how willing you are to see some familiar ideas with a slightly different spin.

I've got mixed feelings. I enjoyed "Silence," because for most of the episode, I wasn't sure how the situation would resolve. Once it *did* resolve, I wasn't thrilled, but I didn't feel entirely cheated, either. It's only on reflection that I'm bothered by how, for all its clever tricks, there was no center here, that it's less like the tricks drove the narrative, and more like the narrative was just an excuse to do strange things. Contrast that with "We'll Always Have Paris": while I think "Silence" is a more successful episode overall (it hangs together better, and the end at least resolves in a satisfying way), "Paris" tried to play with new ideas. I've said it before: the reason GLBs are so frustrating is that they have no limitations on their abilities, so there's no game for us to follow along. Q works (or at least he *can* work) because his personality is so distinctive and provides its own restrictions to his action. The being in "Silence" is just a dick.

The set-up is cool, anyway. We get a really interesting opening sequence with Riker and Worf fighting computer bad-guys on the holodeck. (Picard's "I'm worried" to Troi is a bit silly.) Anything that lets Worf be more of a bad-ass is aces in my book, and it's fascinating how he's developing; his battle anger is clearly an essential part of his nature that must be controlled, and vented, but never resolved. This may change down the road, but the fact that it's not presented as a negative element to his character is surprising and, well, neat. It puts more emphasis on what makes Worf distinct. There's no real pay-off in this episode, apart from Worf having a freak out further in, but it's effective anyway.

Also effective is the hole of nothingness that the *Enterprise* stumbles across. There's a lot of discussion about how little sense it makes, and again, I want to call attention to how much fun it is to watch these characters debate the meaning of a situation. It doesn't always work (see: "The Child"), but when it does, it makes the show more about exploration and understanding, which, after all, is the main mission. Also also effective is the way the situation worsens in a natural way, from Picard wanting to get a closer look (but still keeping a seemingly safe distance), to the splotch swallowing the ship and trapping everyone inside.

The threat deepens: the *Enterprise* can't escape the blotch, even traveling at high warp. (Excellent use of the stationary beacon. It'd be an interesting challenge to develop a machine that could actually remain in a fixed position in the vacuum of space. Must not last that long.) A Romulan ship shows up, attacks, and explodes after a return volley of fire. A Federation ship appears, the *Enterprise*'s sister ship, and when Riker and Worf beam aboard, they find that nothing inside the new ship is as it should be. This is where Worf has his freak out, as apparently Klingons don't deal well with space-time anomalies, but I have to question the logic of beaming aboard in the first place. There are no life signs on the new ship, and seeing how quick the Romulan ship exploded, Something Is Clearly Up. At the very least, send some redshirts in first. Why risk a familiar face?

Of course, the only person to die in "Silence" is a redshirt, a poor helmsman who gets zapped by a GLB who doesn't quite grasp the concept of death. Which is absurd, really. The being, which calls itself Nagilum, talks about the traits of humanity that separate our race from all others, so presumably it's done some research on those other races. I don't really believe that "death" is that unusual a concept. (Are we supposed to assume a galaxy full of immortals?) Maybe Nagilum just wanted to fulfill a genre movie stereotype and murder the black guy first, I dunno. Really, this is the part where my interest in the episode starts to wane. We've done GLBs, we've done tests, we've done GLBs running tests, and while the lack of moral component to this test is intriguing, it's frustrating to have such a striking concept explained in a lazy, ill-defined manner. (Suddenly, I grasp why so many people hated the *Lost* finale.) (I didn't hate it myself, mainly because I was just looking for emotional resolution and was mostly happy that the story didn't completely screw the pooch. Still, I get how [REDACTED] and "GLB" could be considered rough equivalents.)

Thankfully, the story doesn't end there. Nagilum explains how he wants to murder half the crew in his experiments (why explain this? Why give them time to react? Unless their reaction is part of the test), and Picard, realizing that he doesn't have any way to fight the creature off, decides he'd rather sacrifice everyone than let some crazy sky-face screw around with his ship. So he turns on the self-destruct (once again, this happens in Engineering), and prepares to wait out death. We've talked about Picard and Kirk's differences before, but here, I think, we have a perfect example of where the two men would agree. I'm not sure the ethics of Picard's choice, but I believe Kirk would've come to the same conclusion (didn't he actually pull the same threat at least once?), and I also believe the ability to conceive of such a solution, and the will to carry it out, are essential components of leadership. It's arrogant, and possibly monstrous, as Picard doesn't take a poll to see if anyone minds dying for a principle, but it's also a decisive, clear-headed choice, once committed to, never backed down from.

It's also the only option Picard had to save the *Enterprise*. What follows is an entertaining mind game, as Nagilum tries to convince Picard to back down from the self-destruct by taking on the guises of Troi and Data. (I wonder if Riker is hurt when he finds out that Nagilum apparently didn't think the captain would take him seriously enough to be effective?) Picard sees through this, calls Nagilum on it, and then the ship is released from the blotch of doom. Not entirely convinced, Picard tests their freedom by taking a quick spin with the warp drive engines, only calling off the self-destruct at the last possible moment. It is, no question, hardcore. The conversation Picard has with the GLB in his ready room afterwards is a little too much like every other GLB conversation ("You are an immature race blah blah you show promise blah blah blah can you get me Troi's phone number," and so on.), but really, Picard's maneuvering is thrilling enough that the episode ends on a relative high note. It's not amazing: Haskell's death gets forgotten almost immediately, and the whole "experimenting on humans" trope is really tired by now. It's solid, though.

Grade: B

"Elementary, Dear Data"

I should hate this. I mean, I loved this episode (and its sequel)(spoiler!) when it first aired, because it had a talking robot who wore a hat (I was an easy to please kid), but it has a lot of elements I've come to dislike about *TNG*. The holodeck is insanely powerful and dangerous for no good reason; Brent Spiner over-acts, which can be a clown-on-styrofoam experience; and the plot hangs in part on Pulaski's contempt for Data. Plus, the episode's got the actor who played the super fey butler from *The Nanny*, and that is a show I would dearly love to never think about again.

I don't hate "Elementary, Dear Data," though. I thoroughly expected to, and was dreading having to watch it for the recap, but something odd happened by the ten minute mark. Spiner was playing Sherlock Holmes as broad as Marilyn Monroe at a Hemingway convention, and Levar Burton was doing a bizarre British accent (he sounded like he was gargling something painful), but instead of drafting a formal letter of resignation to my AV Club overlords, I started grinning. I didn't stop grinning, either. Let me stress this: Data's Holmes is ri-goddamn-diculous. Geordi's Watson is as bad. And yet their tomfoolery is so infectiously winning that I couldn't help but be charmed. I still winced from time to time, sure, but unlike the tepid noir references of "The Big Goodbye," "Elementary" gets enough details right that the clumsiness is more a matter of character than poor writing. Data and Geordi act like dorks because they *are* dorks, and, let's face it, so are we.

Now that I've said nice things (and I've got a few more up my sleeve), I might as well talk about Ms. Bad News herself. This is as good a place as any to start into Pulaski's treatment of Data, since the episode hinges on her refusal to accept that Data is capable of deductive reasoning. (What's fascinating here is that she views Data as an object, but is essentially criticizing him for failing to live up to the standards of a *fictional character*. How does this help her reasoning? No one can live up to the standard of Sherlock Holmes! It's like an orphan having his lack of parents questioned because he never really got into the crime-fighting, spandex-wearing lifestyle.) Pulaski's mistreatment of the *Enterprise* android is, like the rest of the character, a matter of bad judgment. She's supposed to be raising questions about the nature of consciousness, the definition of life, and what it means to be human. Instead, she's a bigot, and a charmless one. That's bad enough, but the way the rest of the crew treats her concerns as if they're worthy of argument is bizarre. Data has a rank in Starfleet. He's been an equal crew member for the entirety of the first season. He is (shudder) fully functional. If someone showed up at your office and started treating one of

your co-workers like an uppity coffee machine, would you debate the issue, or would you tell her to get stuffed? (All right, all right, pretend it's a co-worker you actually *like*.)

There's also the problem of Geordi's little experiment, and what it does to the holodeck. One of the big questions of the episode is the difference between wisdom and knowledge. Data, clearly, has knowledge, but Pulaski (and, in a more friendly way, Geordi) doubts that he's capable of the reasoning and maturity required to have wisdom. In order to test this, Geordi has the computer whip up an opponent who could actually defeat Data in the Holmesian fashion. So the computer, stealing some power from the rest of the ship, creates a Moriarty capable of self-actualization. This is a villain who sees the exit to his fake existence, and actually strives to escape the confines of the illusion.

Daniel Davis (the afore mentioned butler) plays Moriarty, and he's quite good, managing an air of menace even while making the character sympathetic, intelligent, and tragic. So he's not my problem. My problem is that the creation of Moriarty is a cheat. I like the cleverness of the computer inventing something self-aware as the only possible way to defeat Data, but nobody really considers the implications. Given Data's treatment on the show as a singular creation, why aren't people more impressed with the discovery that their ship can create artificial intelligence by voice command? In "The Big Goodbye," the villains tried to escape the holodeck, but they never really transcended the bounds of their programming. Moriarty does, and it happens too easily. At least give me an electrical storm in space, or mention the Binars again.

If we accept that Moriarty is possible, though, "Elementary" becomes very interesting indeed. The strange programming glitches in "Goodbye" were used primarily as threats for the lead characters. Here, Moriarty does endanger the *Enterprise*, but only because he wants to be taken seriously as an independent will. When Picard goes to confront him, Moriarty cedes control almost immediately, and without need for violence on anyone's part. The question is more what happens when a limited being desires to evolve. What responsibilities do its creators have? And how do you handle a consciousness that only wants a freedom you can't provide? We don't really get a satisfactory answer, and I'm not sure there is one. The fact that the issue is taken as seriously as it is here, though, is important. There's real sadness to Moriarty's fumbling, and while I don't want to give too much credit to a five minute scene, it doesn't blink, and it doesn't turn him into an easily defeated virus.

"Elementary" is kind of a mess, because it spends so much time before getting to the main event that the first section of the episode doesn't tie in too well with the latter half. Data, who seemed like the focus of the plot at the beginning, is largely a bystander by the end, and his abilities as a detective are irrelevant. (I do love the scene when he first realizes something is wrong, though. His sudden switch from fun-and-games to shit-got-real is excellent.) (Maybe that's why Spinner's silliness works here; it keeps getting contrasted with his restraint as regular Data.) We could've used more time with Moriarty, and more thematic cohesiveness would've been cool. Still, this is a tremendous amount of fun, provided you don't mind getting your nerd on.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Pulaski is deeply offended to have a security team present at the birth of the kid who magically appeared in its mother's womb and took three days to gestate. Look, it's either gonna be Jesus or a xenomorph. I'm sure Jesus would love to meet Worf.
- I didn't mention Wesley's subplot in "The Child" at all, since I was already hating on everything else, but: he decides to stay aboard the *Enterprise* instead of transferring to be with his mother. (Beverly's now the Head of Starfleet Medical, which is swell for her.) I loved the hilariously awkward turbolift chat Wesley has with Picard. "It's going to be hard leaving the *Enterprise*." "Mixed feelings for all of us." Yeah, I'll bet.
- Pulaski does get one good line in "Silence," after Picard announces his plans: "Why do I get the feeling that this was not the time to join this ship?"
- I really dig Riker and Worf's relationship. It's got a great friendly antagonism that the show could use more of.

- Next week, we continue the second season with "The Outrageous Okona," "Loud As A Whisper," and "The Schizoid Man." (Er, haven't I done that last one [before](#)?)



By [Zack Handlen](#)

Jun 10, 2010 11:33 AM

"The Outrageous Okona"

People used to give me a lot of advice on how to relax. They were trying to help, of course, but there's no helpful way to explain, "Don't try so hard," because it draws attention to your self-consciousness that only serves to reinforce it. I wanted everybody to love me, I didn't think anyone possibly could, so I put every ounce of sweat and concentration I had towards making myself acceptable, pleasing, and, as is relevant to this week's first episode, hilarious. Now, I can be funny in person. I'm not any great wit or anything, but at my best, I get by. The trouble that it's hard to be funny when you're *trying* to be funny--some people can pull it off, but most of us can't, and when you're stuck in a position of desperately wanting to blow everyone away, you mostly end up fizzling out. Nothing kills comedy quite as dead as visible effort.

This delightful personal revelation comes as a way to try and explain why "The Outrageous Okona" is so goddamn painful. It's not the worst episode we've had, because the story makes a rough amount of sense, there's no blatant racism or sexism, and only one actor makes a fool of himself. It's lousy, though. The first warning sign hits you in the opening credits: "Joe Piscopo as The Comic." You have to be a certain age to see that name and be horrified, but even if you don't recognize the presence of one of the eighties worst break-out comedic actors, your heart is sure to break once you realize *why* "Okona" needs a "The Comic." Data wants to be funny. And now he's going to take lessons.

Before we get to that, the main plot of "Okona," the plot that inspires Data's latest attempts to become human and also provides us with the only relief (here used in the loosest possible sense) from those attempts, centers on a guest star, William O. Campbell, aka Bill Campbell, aka The Rocketeer. ("The Rockawho?") Campbell plays a Han Solo-ish scoundrel who gets picked up by the *Enterprise* when his engine dies mid-trip. Troi clears him in advance, explaining to Picard that he's a good guy and a "rogue." (I actually wrote down "rogue" in my notes about ten seconds before Troi said it, which shows you how, um, distinctive Okona is.) Okona beams aboard, and immediately starts hitting on the super hot teleporter engineer. Played by Teri Hatcher, who I guess had some kind of a contract that required her to make at least one guest appearance on ever eighties genre show.

Anyway, Okona's charms work on Hatcher. And not just on Hatcher; we get the impression he's basically screwing his way through the female portion of the crew. It's hokey, and more than a little absurd, given that we have not one but two jokes based on someone watching an attractive woman hanging over the guy in their bedroom, but unlike the comedy sections, it's not painful. I'm not completely convinced that Okona's easy-going charisma is what's getting him laid. Campbell is a good-looking dude, and it probably gets boring on a space-ship, so while I'm not sure I buy the *Enterprise* is full of Leisure Suit Larry characters, I do think it's reasonable to think there'd been some screwing going on. If we choose to ignore the somewhat silly presentation (and we'll be doing more of that soon), I can appreciate the ethos behind it. This isn't a morality play. Okona doesn't turn out to be a bastard, and none of the women regret hooking up. I dig that. I dig the optimism of a free love society which still encourages committed relationships.

Sadly, this isn't just a mildly tone-deaf attempt at a sex romp. (While *TOS* had some great lusty sequences, *TNG* really isn't a sexy show. It's too deliberate, too reasonable, too polite. It's at its best when the characters discuss problems and work together towards solutions in a thoughtful, conscientious way. I'm not knocking that, either--I think it's one of the things that makes the show stand out, and one of the big reasons why the Borg threat is so effective when it arrives. The only problem is, it's really hard to want to rip the clothes off somebody when you have to fill out forms in triplicate first.) If that's all it was, "Okona" would be middling, a forgettable forty minutes of fluff notable only for the presence of two up and coming guest actors, and for Okona's *Ice Pirates*-style outfit.

Instead, after talking with Okona, Data decides he wants to learn how to tell jokes. He's been struggling with this before, but this is the first time we've spent scenes watching him make the effort. Theoretically, it's not a bad idea. Data's quest to become human has dramatic potential, because it offers writers a chance to get philosophical ("What does it mean to be human?") without losing the grounding of a likable, intelligent character. I've talked before about how break-out characters are often the ones who question social conventions that everyone else takes for granted, and that's essentially what Data *is*; the difference being that Data's questions are respectful and curious, which actually makes them harder to answer. Having him put some effort into understanding what makes a joke work could've been a great opportunity to show how impossible it is to explain some things, and how that translates to Data's quest as a whole, the way "being human" is such a nebulous concept that achieving it is as much about asking questions as it is about answering them.

Technically, they do try this, and I very much liked Guinan telling Data at the end of the episode that there's more to humanity than just an ability to tell jokes well. The real problem here is that it's an episode about humor with no good laugh lines. Worse, it's an episode about humor with no good laugh lines that *thinks* it's really, really funny. Data's attempts at stand-up are supposed to fall flat, (although I don't think they're supposed to be quite as wince-inducing as they actually are; once again we're reminded that Brent Spiner trying to act "human" is really loud. I think, as a friend reminded me, it's because Spiner's background is in theater, and none of the episode directors have made an effort to tone him down) but the scenes with Piscopo are equally terrible, and there's a bit with Piscopo and

Data both pretending Jerry Lewis that kind of made me want to die. The idea that Piscopo, who's basically just Jay Leno with muscle tone, is one of the best comedians of the 20th Century is, well, horrifying. Was there some kind of apocalypse that left the future with nothing but thousands of copies of *Dead Heat*?

At least we have Whoopi Goldberg on hand, and I heard she might have done some stand-up at some point. Data goes to Guinan for advice, which is a nice meta-moment that the episode never overplays. (Actually, that may have less to do with subtlety and more to do with me occasionally forgetting that Goldberg made her name as a comedian. I'm old, sometimes I forget things.) That's ruined, though, by the fact that Guinan's few attempts at humor are as bad, if not worse, than Data's. "You're a droid and I'm a noid"? Seriously? It's hard to remember this show ever being intentionally funny. Whimsical, sure, endearing, definitely, but intentionally hilarious? I'd say it happens occasionally, but right now, the idea of a purely comic episode (like, say, *TOS*'s "Trouble With Tribbles") here gives me the shakes. I suppose "Okona" could've been worse. The discovery at the end that the title character isn't quite as immature as he appears to be is a nice twist, and, even better, it indicates that the writers are getting a handle on how to tell a story that's paced reasonably well. Too bad so much of that pacing is given over to pain. Data learns a valuable lesson that humor can't be forced, and we learn the same, albeit in a far less friendly way.

Grade: C-

"Loud As A Whisper"

There's something about *TNG*'s tone that always makes episodes like this harder to take. I've been trying for years to figure out the best way to describe it, but every time I do, all I can think of is one word: pastel. That's not enough, really, but it's close. I love *TNG*, I love the cast, and I love the great stories we eventually get, but right now, so many of these episodes are like getting stuck in a doctor's waiting room, flipping through copies of *Readers Digest*, staring at renderings of landscapes and abstract designs hanging on the walls, lost in a sea of light brown, gray, pink. Great ideas are important, but the wrong presentation can make even the greatest idea fall flat, and sometimes that's what these early seasons sometimes feel like: smart writing and some great acting buried under a sea of surface mediocrity.

For an experiment, I tried to separate "Loud As A Whisper"'s concept from its execution. It's not a bad episode for that approach. "Whisper" is often painfully earnest in its philosophical meanderings, and it's nearly impossible to watch without snickering in places, but it's also thoughtful, sincere, and, if you can stop rolling your eyes long enough, inspiring. I'm not saying it's *successful* at those things, at least not completely. I am saying, though, that this is the kind of storytelling that will eventually develop into true greatness. Sort of like "We'll Always Have Paris." (Note to self: Try and come up with a different way to be optimistic for next week. They may be catching on how much of these reviews are copy and paste.)

The *Enterprise* is on transport duty, assigned with bringing a diplomat named Riva to Solais V to negotiate a peace between two warring factions. Riva is a really big deal, although no one seems to know much about him, except that he has a reputation for resolving seemingly irresolvable conflicts. While this mystery does give us a chance to figure out the situation at the same time as Picard and the others do, it's implausible. Riva's "secret" is so fundamental to his character, and so immediately obvious to anyone who meets him, that I can't believe it hadn't come up before. Like, I dunno, Starfleet saying, "Hey, could you go pick up this guy? Oh, and FYI, he's deaf, and he's got three friends who communicate for him." It's a small point, and I won't harp on it for much longer, but this sort of thing does damage to the show's universe, because in trying to oversell a twist, it undercuts continuity. In order for surprise situations to be effective, we need to feel like the *Enterprise* crew generally knows what's going on. As it is, too often Picard seems to be wandering into someone else's play.

Right, Riva's "secret." It is, no denying it, goofy. Riva can't speak for himself (y'know, "deaf" doesn't automatically mean "mute"), so he's got two guys and a girl to do the work for him. Each member of the trio represents a specific element of Riva's personality. One guy's the thinker and artist, the other guy's the warrior and lover, and the woman is harmony and balance. (So, the two men are active, while the woman just sets a reasonable bedtime. Sounds fair to me!) Each can read Riva's thoughts, and which ever one is most indicative of his emotional state is the one who expresses those thoughts aloud. So if he's musing, it's the Dork, if he's horny, it's the Stud, and if he's, I dunno, in sort of a warm-milk-and-tedium mood, it's the Mom.

Troi calls this form of expression "elegant," which is one of the more ridiculous things she's said lately. It's certainly interesting, but there's no simplicity to it, and it's hard to imagine how such a system would develop naturally. Yet the concept is dramatically interesting for what it tells us about Riva's intentions, and just plausible enough that you could sort of see it working. It raises questions--how are the people chosen? Does he work with the same three all his life? Do they get time off when he's not on diplomatic missions, or is this a lifetime gig?--but leaving those questions unanswered means we've got less plot holes to worry about, and more encouragement to figure it out for ourselves. Also, it makes sense that this could help Riva make peace, because the communication is so striking and odd that it could serve as a distracting from heated emotions. In order to understand what was happening, the feuding parties would have to pay attention, and that's the first step towards a dialog.

Of course, in practice... Riva is immediately attracted to Troi, and she to him, so when he starts putting the moves on her it's supposed to be romantic. I think. It plays as creepy and overly forceful, possibly because there's something unpleasant about a large, full-bearded man staring at you with a smile that wonders if your empathy goes all the way up. The relationship becomes more palatable as the episode progresses, which is good because it's fairly important to the plot, but that initial vibe lingers, and I think that's because Riva's intentions are so blatant from the start. Whenever he "speaks" with Troi, it's the Stud who does the talking, and it's like they're ganging up on her. Things only really work once the Stud exits the room, and Riva starts speaking to Troi via sign language. At least then, they're equally matched.

Apparently the Solari agree with me, because when Riva and the Rivettes beam down for some negotiating madness, somebody shoots and kills the Rivettes. It's a really smart twist, too, the kind that in retrospect seems obvious (how else could they raise the stakes?) but comes as a shock at the time. Given the whole pastel-vibe, I hadn't been expecting this, and the deaths are appropriately disturbing, very quick, but you see skeletons and stuff. (Makes you wonder of the bad guy had stole a laser from a *Mars Attacks* Martian.) Riva's self-confidence is shattered, which means for the first time in the episode, it's possible to actually kind of like him, and Troi gets a chance to be active and tell Riva to man up. Oh, and Data learns sign language.

I don't precisely like "Whisper." There's that tone problem again, and Riva himself annoyed me, but once I was willing to look past my initial reservations, I can at least respect what I saw. Again, this episode is well-constructed, and lacks the egregious padding we've seen in some earlier first season work. We are presented with a scenario, we arrive at the scenario, the scenario becomes something else, and everything is resolved at the end. I'm not sure how well Riva's "I'm gonna teach them sign language!" plan would actually work, but I believe that it *could* work. Oh, and this is our second episode in a row where the guest star essentially does all the heavy lifting, story-wise. Troi gives a pep talk, but it's Riva who drives the action here, much like Okona did. That the show can do this, and not have the main crew seem like passive observers, is essential.

Grade: B-

"The Schizoid Man"

It's becoming readily apparent this week that Data-centric episodes are much more difficult to pull off than I'd thought. "Elementary, Dear Data" was quite fun, although not entirely because of the android's presence, and "Okona"'s forgettable goofiness suffered whenever Data took central focus. "Schizoid" doesn't exactly deal with the Robo-Pinocchio's quest for real live boydom, but it does give Brent Spiner a chance to go over-the-top, and that's never good. He's supposed to be creepy here, at least, but the result is more cringe-inducing than suspenseful or thrilling, and we've got a climax that, while somewhat justifiable character-wise, comes to a conclusion that falls to pay off dramatically.

Ira Graves is a very smart man. He's so smart that he has a whole planet named after him, but now he's dying, which means his vast intellect isn't really much of a comfort anymore. (The smarter you are, the more difficult it becomes to lie to yourself that everything will work out okay.) When he gets his terminal diagnosis, he considers downloading all this knowledge into a computer, but with Data around, maybe there's a better option. Maybe he can put not just his brains but his heart into this Tin Man, live a second life, and get a chance to put the moves on the young hottie who he's been crushing on for years.

There are things to like here. After hearing the distress call from Gravesworld, the *Enterprise* also gets a call from a ship with a hull breach, and Picard is forced to decide between attempting a rescue for one of the great minds of the age, or addressing a more immediate, clear problem with a higher potential body count. What's cool here is that the problem isn't presented as a one or the other scenario. Writers often try and squeeze drama out of putting characters in situations with impossible choices: save A or save B, but you can't save both. It's a very powerful structure, and when it's done effectively, it can be pretty brilliant. (Recent last week's *Breaking Bad* for a complicated, but astonishingly rich example.) The problem is, those scenarios have to be earned. You can't cheat, since the entire point of the dilemma is its inexorableness. If an audience can easily see a third solution that solves both problems, the question falls apart. So here, instead of trying to manufacture false conflict, Picard and his crew find a reasonable answer to both distress calls. It requires a "near-warp transport," which is a neat sounding idea, and there's a little danger in it (Troi, who's never experienced it before, talks about how she thought she was beamed into a wall for a second), but everybody gets what they need.

We get a hot female Vulcan doctor, Lieutenant Selar, who Pulaski has "complete faith in." I'm not sure I agree. Her doctoring skills are passable, but she's not a very good actress, and has a tendency to overplay her condescending smiles. With Sela in the away team that beams down to see Graves is Worf, Data, and Troi. I don't really know why Troi is there. Given that the *Enterprise* was speeding off to rescue a ship with hundreds of potential casualties, you'd think her psychological gifts would've been better served at crowd control and handling a major crisis, rather than hanging out and getting leered at. (Admittedly, at this point in the show, that's kind of her thing. Every other episode it seems like somebody's trying to get in her uniform. I guess with Denise Crosby out of the picture, and with Pulaski as the doctor, Troi is stuck as the token hot chick.)

Graves is irascible and pissy, and pretty much exactly what you get if you tried to imagine "stereotypical super genius living in isolation with his hottie assistant." He's played by character actor William Morgan Sheppard, so at least the cliché is real enough that don't mind it so much. It's wonderful that, even with the attempts to raise the number of women in the regular cast, *TNG* is still sticking with the fifties stereotype of male mad scientists who get the job done despite the nattering of their loving but ineffectual female help. Well, not wonderful, actually. More

like inane. Graves' co-worker, Kareen, is pretty and pleasant and terribly concerned, and Graves is in love with her. When Troi tells Kareen this--okay, hold up a second, did anyone on the writing staff ever take into consideration how insanely invasive Troi's empathy powers really were? Here she's revealing a long-hidden crush. In "Whisper," she badgers Worf about his frustration with Riva, despite Worf's clear unwillingness to discuss the issue. We've seen her bug Picard before, too. Look, being a person, or a sentient life-form, or whatever, means that you're going to feel things occasionally that you don't want other people to know about. What gives Troi the right to decide when and to whom to share that information with? She doesn't even take Worf aside to talk to him!

Ahem. Back on point. Kareen says maybe if Graves were younger, something might've happened between them, which is a lot less icky than her suddenly falling for the old bastard. Thankfully, there's ickiness to come, because once he realizes he can't escape his mortality, Grave downloads his essence into Data's positronic brain, and takes over. It's... I'm not really sure what it is, but I don't think it works. Data-Graves starts hitting on Kareen, he gives himself a hilariously unctuous eulogy, and then he gets really really pissed off at Picard. What's weird is how this all seems so *predictable*. I've seen my share of movies and shows where good people go bad, and there's nothing unexpected about Data-Graves' actions, and nothing all that exciting. Despite the attempt to play things on the down-low, it's obvious early on what Graves has done, and that means there's no real stakes here. Data himself isn't in danger, and the damage he does is easily fixable. We don't really care enough about Graves to worry about the actions of his post-mortem avatar. So really, it's just a series of checklist scenes, until Picard tries to talk Data-Graves down.

We've got an episode coming up, "The Measure Of A Man," that calls into question Data's rights as a sentient being, and I'm hoping that'll deal with some of the potential fall-out from what we see here. If "Schizoid" can be used to try and prove that Data as a machine is a potential danger to those around him (he's more vulnerable to this sort of attack, and he's more physically powerful than organic folks), at least then it could've served some purpose. As is, it's not that fun to watch (although Sheppard's enjoyable), not that interesting, and way more uncomfortable than it really ought to be.

Grade: C-

Stray Observations:

- "That's a joke. It's funny." No. Not really in any way, honestly.
- There are probably a lot of typos in this one--it's been a weird week, and the write-up was already late.
Enjoy!
- So, ladies: just how dreamy *is* Okona? Be honest, and show your work.
- Guinan claims that laughing is "uniquely human." It is? 'Cause I'm pretty sure we've seen other species laughing. In fact, isn't Guinan herself another species?
- We get some rare over-acting from Patrick Stewart in "Whisper." His pep-talk to Riva, post-Rivettes, is really oversold.
- I really liked Picard's last scene with Troi in "Whisper," though. He thanks her for her work, and it's rather sweet.
- Graves' "If I Only Had A Heart" whistling would've been cooler if the episode hadn't gone out of its way to explain the reference. (And I really don't buy that Data wouldn't be familiar with it.)
- Wesley has become a standard feature of the bridge crew, and I gotta say, he's doing a decent job. I especially liked him mocking Data's eulogy in "Schizoid."
- I'm bowing to the will of the collective: from now on, the grade at the top of each recap will be the average of the three grades episodes.
- Next week, it's "Unnatural Selection," "A Matter Of Honor," and, whattaya know, "The Measure Of A Man."



By [Zack Handlen](#)

Jun 17, 2010 11:38 AM

"Unnatural Selection"

How do you solve a problem like Pulaski? Let's overlook the character flaws, the miscasting, the way she doesn't quite fit, and just deal with generalities. As mediocre as the first season of *TNG* was, the new crew of the *Enterprise* was a solid unit by the end. Some of them had been developed better than others, but with the death of Tasha Yar, we finally settled into something approaching a groove. People had roles, and they fulfilled them, and even more importantly, those roles all meshed with each other reasonably well. Yes, Troi was a bit on the useless side ("I sense understatement, Captain,"), but this is less about individual importance and more how we, as the audience, became attached to a certain concept of the show's cast. You watch something long enough, you develop a bond with the people you're watching. Upset that bond, and the show risks ruining one of the few undeniable advantages it has.

Enter Pulaski, then. It's the second season, so it's not automatically the end of the world to do some cast change-up. Beverly Crusher, while pleasant enough, hadn't had a huge amount of character development (dead husband, nerdy son, had the hots for Picard), so her absence doesn't ruin any delicate structures. The trick, then, is trying to make her as important to the audience as the rest of the crew, in a much shorter span of time. The downside is, before Pulaski is sufficiently developed, her sudden appearance can throw off the cast chemistry, her scenes becoming dead spots in each episode. Fortunately, though, since the rest of the character know their responsibilities, it's easier to contrast their personalities against this new person's, and use that contrast to flesh her out.

Well, that's a theory, anyway, and "Unnatural Selection" is an attempt to do something with that theory, by giving Pulaski her first real main storyline. Not only is she the person driving the action for much of the episode, characters spend an awful lot of time discussing her in her absence. By the end, we have a much clearer picture of the character--or at least, we have a clearer picture of what the writers really want her character to be. Unfortunately, like I mentioned at the start of the season, those intentions fail to live up to the final result, and what we have is a classic example of a strong actor unable to find a necessary sympathy with the role she's performing.

The *Enterprise* gets a distress signal from the *Lantree*, but by the time they arrive the entire crew is dead of old age. (Pulaski does a scan, brings out the old chestnut they always deliver in premature seniority story-lines: "They all died of natural causes." Why is this supposed to be more shocking than the evident fact of their advanced aging?) We get a neat scene where Picard takes remote control of the *Lantree* via computer codes, just like Kirk took control of Khan's ship way back in *Wrath Of Khan*, and then a quick scan of the records determines that the ship's last stopping point was at the Darwin Station. They do genetic research there. Wonder if that's relevant?

The crux of the episode is Pulaski's supposed humanism. As a McCoy analog, she is supposed to be passionate, willful, and intent on putting her patients' needs above all other concerns. In practice, this means becoming immediately and deeply obsessed with protecting the results of the research done on Darwin: supposedly genetically perfect humanoids who are unaffected by whatever's causing the aging sickness. The Darwin scientists themselves are all suffering, including their spokeswoman, Dr. Kingsley, who blames contact with the *Lantree* for the problem. She demands that the *Enterprise* beam the children aboard, since they won't be able to fend for themselves with the

adults dead. Pulaski agrees with Kingsley's assessment, despite never having seen these children, and despite the fact that contact with them would put the *Enterprise's* crew--people it's her *job* to protect--in potential danger, regardless of Kingsley's repeated assurances otherwise.

Pulaski's commitment to a foolhardy idea doesn't do her any favors. Over and over throughout the episode we're informed of her devotion, her stubbornness, her intellect, and while all three traits are technically apparent, in practice, they don't serve to make her more endearing. Her arguments with Picard don't work, because it's impossible to understand what point she's trying to make. Intellectually, yes, a case could be made for the importance of protecting the kids, given the amount of time and research put into them, and simply for their rights as living, sentient beings. In order to make that case work, though, a person would have to be so convinced of the rightness of their cause that their passion for it would overwhelm all other responsibilities. It would need to be a situation in which the children will die without immediate intervention.

This sort of conflict happened all the time in *TOS*. Kirk was often faced with situations in which he'd need to sacrifice the few for the needs of the many, and part of McCoy's job on the show was to make sure the voice of those few was always heard. The trouble is, *TNG* doesn't really deal in the same levels of danger. There have been (and will be) times when the crew is in incredible peril, but rarely are we faced with the kind of moral dilemma that the original show did so well. If *TOS* was about translating fables into science fiction, *TNG* is about using science to exhaust all options. There's no sense of necessity in Pulaski's demands. She comes off as short-sighted and immature, and given that her entire performance is so restrained and detached, there's no way to empathize with her.

Really, Diana Muldaur isn't right for this part. Her sudden intense desire to protect the kids comes across less as a defining characteristic than as a weird kind of nervous breakdown. We learn over the course of the episode that Pulaski is frustrated with Picard's "by-the-book" methods, which is a conflict I had to keep reminding myself had been established before (she objected to the security team being present while Troi gave birth in "The Child"), and then later we discover she specifically requested a transfer to the *Enterprise* because of her deep respect for the man. Neither the conflict nor the respect rings true. Pulaski seems to equally dislike *everyone* on the ship, and if she's so in awe of Picard--a man whose methods she's studied, a man who she herself has accused of being obsessed with

regulation--why the hell would her first act upon transferring aboard his ship be to ignore him and directly contradict established procedure?

Pulaski gets her way, and deals with one of the kids, putting herself and Data at risk in order to prove what anyone with a brain knew ages ago: the kids are responsible for the aging sickness. Super genius Kingsley keeps bragging about the children's perfect immune systems, and it turns out those immune systems are so amazing that they produce airborne antibodies at even the slightest hint of disease. (Hence the mention of Thelusian Flu earlier.) Once the antibodies are activated, they decide that "regular" humans are essentially viral, and must be destroyed. There is potentially a tragic arc to science creating lethal beauty, but Kingsley is tedious and one-note, and the children themselves are vaguely beatific blank slates. As episodes go, this had a clever enough conclusion--using the transporter to restore the afflicted was satisfying, and it's always fun to see Picard save the day. The problem is, "Selection" depends on Pulaski for emotional depth, and that gets old, fast.

Grade: C+

"Matter Of Honor"

Oh thank god *yes*.

So far I haven't had a whole lot of surprises doing these recaps. I knew the first season was largely terrible, I knew I didn't much care for Tasha Yar or Dr. Pulaski, I knew Patrick Stewart kicked ass, and all of these beliefs have been confirmed. There are little surprises, though, and the best of them is that I really dig William T. Riker. Jonathan Frakes has always struck me as a nice enough guy, but I don't remember having an opinion on him when I first watched the series. Data and Picard took up most of my attention. As I got older, somewhere I got the idea that Riker wasn't all that highly respected among Trek fans. I decided he was smarmy, and dumb, and, at best, a place-filler for the real leads to bounce lines off.

Screw that. Riker is really, really fun. He is a bit smarmy, but the guy is so clearly having fun with his job that it's infectious. He's the Han Solo of the group, and while Frakes doesn't quite have Harrison Ford's charisma (Frakes is

too familiar to be really rakish; he's like an uncle who occasionally sells you pot), he does well as a guy who loves his work, loves his friends, and every once in a while likes to screw around with both. For fun, check out the way he stands. It's easy to mimic, easy to mock, but it's also bad-ass, because he knows he's a little ridiculous and he doesn't care. Kind of makes me think of Timothy Olyphant's strut, although that is a deliberate, "I'm walking this way to keep myself from murdering someone each time I put my foot down," whereas with Riker, it's like he just wants to make sure you know he's screwing with you. He takes his duties seriously, but he also finds a lot of things pretty hilarious at the same time, and I dig that.

Another surprise is how much I like Worf. He hasn't gotten as much to do yet, but the show is getting better at giving him lines, and letting him be funny. (The eye-roll he does when Pulaski demands the children be saved in "Selection" is great.) Worf and Riker's relationship is probably the closest the show gets to really capturing that *TOS* tone: the two are friends, but there's an edgy playfulness to that friendship that you don't really see in, say, Data and Geordi's interactions. Worf doesn't do a lot in "Matter of Honor," but what he does get is choice, and he's basically an entry-point to Klingon culture as a whole. We've seen how Worf deals with others of his race in the context of the *Enterprise*, but what happens when a mere human is set adrift in Klingon culture, without the recourse of the Federation to aid them?

"Honor" has Riker signing on for a temporary re-assignment to the Klingon ship *Pagh*. It's part of an officer exchange program, but no one from Starfleet has ever attempt to serve with Klingons. The impression we get here is that it's a potentially dangerous mission, but not an inherently suicidal one. Picard first introduces Riker to the idea while the two of them are playing some sort of target practice with lasers game, and the captain clearly wants Riker to volunteer. Picard is not one to risk his crew lightly. (Which we'll have even better proof of next episode.) He does, though, take the *Enterprise*'s mission of exploration and discovery very seriously, and what's really cool here is that Picard is encouraging Riker to take the assignment for philosophical reasons. It's a plot motivated by one character's eagerness to learn something new.

Plus, Riker clearly gets a kick out of doing his job well. He takes to this new assignment with what can only be deemed as "gusto," sampling ugly Klingon delicacies, and questioning Worf as to the subtleties of Klingon high

command. (Turns out it's the job of the first officer to assassinate his captain the moment the captain proves unworthy to lead. Any bets on how a battle royale between Riker and Picard would turn out?) One of the impressive things about "Honor" is how it manages to set up its premise, and deliver sufficiently on that premise, in the space of a single episode. It's easy to imagine this playing out over multiple hours, and if it happened in a modern genre show, that's probably how it would go--Riker taking some courses, then slowly working his way into Klingon society, developing relationships, questioning his own identity as he starts to relate more and more to their warlike ways, until finally he's forced to make some kind of dramatic choice, betraying a part of himself in the name of survival.

That could've been compelling, but I doubt *TNG* could pull it off as the show currently is, and there's also a great deal to be said for brevity. As a single unit, "Honor" is forced to refine its major conflicts down to their most basic elements. So we get a scene with Riker eating Klingon food, to set us up for a later scene on the *Pagh* where he has to prove himself to his shipmates by munching on some live worms. We get a danger, with the biological organism that threatens the integrity of the *Pagh's* hull, putting the ship at risk and giving the already suspicious Captain Kargan ample reason to mistrust Riker and the *Enterprise*. There's an arc here, and while I'm not sure I'd go so far as to say Riker goes through significant change, there's a sense of him coming into his own. Riker stands equal (or better) with the Klingons, and it works because the Klingons aren't softened or diminished in order to make them "safer." *TNG* is still painting with broad strokes, but its respect for the alien culture here makes for some of the best dramatic moments I've seen on the show. Riker taking over the *Pagh* by tricking Kargan is a cheer-worthy twist, and it wouldn't have worked if it didn't feel earned.

There are some minor quibbles. I don't mind the sub-plot with Mendon learning valuable lessons in the art of communication, but combined with Riker's domination on the *Pagh*, it skews a little too close to the "humanity is the greatest!" tone the series leans on. Some of Kargan's behavior is on the inexplicable side, especially considering his paranoia. He can't possibly believe that Riker would willingly help destroy the *Enterprise*, and while I can see him trying to test the first officer by drawing out his loyalties, Riker probably should've been thrown in the brig once Kargan decided that Starfleet wanted the *Pagh* destroyed. Also, why the hell are the lights so dim on the *Pagh*,

anyway? Are Klingons just that into the color red? Maybe it's a genetic thing, in which case Worf should spend most of his time on the *Enterprise* bridge squinting.

This was really excellent, though, and between it and "Measure of a Man," I finally feel like *TNG* is starting to pay off on investments. Much of what Riker does here follows the familiar genre pattern of an outsider making a place for himself in a new society, but instead of making the story overly-predictable, that familiarity resonates. It's deeply satisfying, which is not a feeling I often get watching this series. I hope it lasts.

Grade: A-

"The Measure Of A Man"

It must be a rule every starship captain's adventures must at some point put him in contact with old flames. How else can you explain the presence in "Measure of a Man" of Phillipa Louvois, former lover and adversary to Jean-Luc Picard, and current JAG Captain at Starbase 173? Much like the "Court Martial" episode of *TOS*, "Measure" tries to mine some emotion out of a years buried relationship, and while watching the two characters spar is amusing, it's not really necessary. (It also doesn't help that Amanda McBroom isn't anywhere near the same acting league as Stewart.) Picard and Phillipa are not the heart of this story. Data is. And for once, we finally get an episode that lives up to his character's potential.

As viewers, there are certain things we tend to accept without asking when we watch sci-fi and fantasy. Those elements change from show to show, but the basic principle stays the same: we accept what is presented as truth in the universe we're watching. We don't have warp travel, we don't have spaceships like the *Enterprise*, we don't have instant teleportation or replicators or holodecks, but all of these are presented as given on *TNG*, and so we don't question their presence. Sure, we can wonder as to the plausibility of certain elements, but unless a show starts breaking its internal rules, we're willing to take quite a lot at face value. Just the name alone, "science fiction," has our expectations prepared. We don't need to see the physics explained in detail as to how Picard and his crew sail the stars. Just to know there's a ship is enough.

For a while now, Data has been one of those accepted truths. Anyone who's spent much time at the movies has seen robots before, so he's not really an anomaly to us. There's Geordi's visor, and Worf, so we already know that this new universe is not solely populated by understandable technology or recognizable humanoids. Yet all along, there have been these certain threads of disquiet as to just what his position in Starfleet, and among his fellow crewmembers, really is. There's a reason that "fully functional" line is so creepy, after all. It's bad writing, but it's also a reminder of Data's uniqueness, his distinction and separation from basic humanity interaction. It's not like anybody had sex with the toaster, but at the same time, just how much of Data is programmed response? How much is choice?

Actually, I doubt that's a question that has plagued me much, since there's never really been any doubt that Data has a soul, that he's a fully conscious, self-realized entity. So maybe the real question, then, is how the other characters view him. Even if we as audience members are conditioned to accept certain central tenets, Picard and the others are not. They accept the holodeck because it's been there for ages, same with warp speed, but Data is a new idea, and even if we have no trouble believing in his basic reality and rights within the series' context, there's no rule that says the characters that live in that context have to agree with us. Imagine if cars started demanding equal pay, or if refrigerators would only be willing to hold certain kinds of food.

On the one hand, it makes sense that a scientist would want to take Data apart to see how he works. It's a bad idea to us, and to the people on the *Enterprise*, because we "know" Data, and his presence on the show (and on the ship) is as valuable as anyone else's. (In some cases, quite a bit more.) To Starfleet, though, Data is simply another computational tool. So now we get to spend some time trying to find out how our acceptance of the idea of Data, and Picard and the others' belief in him, can be expressed in concrete enough terms to defend Data's rights.

It's surprising that Pulaski isn't more present in "Man," considering her general feelings towards the android. I'm not sure if this was a conscious choice, or simply a matter of time; she appears at Data's farewell party, and doesn't have any snide comments to make, so that's all right. She doesn't even rise to some very obvious bait in the poker game at the start of the episode. (Ahhh, *TNG* poker. This, I remember.) Picard does most of the heavy lifting here, as Data's ability to come to his own defense is one of the questions that needs to be answered. Riker gets a few meaty scenes,

and Geordi has a semi-tearful goodbye to Data, but mostly, this one is all the captain. He's the one trading barbs with Phillipa, he's the one who demands a hearing be called to defend Data's rights, and it's his efforts that ultimately save Data from dismantling. Spinner and Stewart work well together, as Data's trusting nature and straight-forwardness meshes nicely with Picard's clear contempt for the complexities of social convention. It's great to see Picard stepping in to protect his crew, and his clear emotional investment in the issue (an issue he himself may have had some questions on before) makes his final arguments in the hearing powerful and moving.

As for the episode's flaws, well, having Guinan basically spell out "THIS IS LIKE SLAVERY" was unnecessary. While I appreciated the overall discussion, I sometimes wondered if the arguments made against Data's autonomy were a little soft. (As when Maddox, the scientist determined the see what makes Data tick, says that no one would allow a ship's computer to refuse a refit. I think if the computer was actually capable of making the refusal, the situation would change. Isn't Data's desire for survival here proof enough of consciousness?) I really, really didn't like shoehorning Riker into leading the prosecution's case, because it's a very obvious attempt to create fake drama. Still, he does well with the role. There's a great scene which shows Riker studying Data's specs; he finds information that can help him "win," grins, and then realizes that in winning, he'd be dooming a friend.

Overall, this was as good as "Matter of Honor," albeit in a different way. "Honor" was an adventure story; "Measure" is the sort of profound philosophizing that *Trek* has always made its bread and butter. Soft arguments or no, "Measure" does well to not play anyone as the bad guy. Even Maddox, a definite irritant, is proven to be more blinded by his passion for his work (and a fear of his own inadequacies) than a villain. Hearing him call Data "he" instead of "it" at the end was nice. (Less nice: Phillipa immediately pointing out the change. Apparently, we can be trusted to follow high-minded debate, but as an audience we suffer from serious pronoun trouble.) *TNG* hasn't lost its flaws, but it's finally, definitively shown that it *can* be great. The next time I find myself wishing I could fast-forward to the good parts, I'll just remember Picard's big speech here, or Riker taking down the *Pagh's* second-in-command. I don't mind waiting for more of that.

Grade: A-

Stray Observations:

- Hey, Brian Thompson! Between this and *X-Files*, I can't seem to shake him lately.
- Is "Unnatural Selection" the first episode to give Chief O'Brien a name? It's good to see him popping up on the show more regularly and getting lines. They even included him in the poker game.
- I mentioned "Naked Now" earlier; "Measure" references Tasha and Data's physical intimacy, and does so to far greater emotional and dramatic impact than the actual original scene did. And Picard's time on the *Stargazer* is also mentioned, which means that two of my least favorite episodes now have some small reason to exist.
- Next week, it's "The Dauphin," "Contagion," and "The Royale."



By [Zack Handlen](#)

Jun 24, 2010 10:00 AM

"The Dauphin"

This is the episode where Wesley falls in love.

...

.....

Still here? I'm impressed!

It's been a while since we had a Wesley-centric episode, hasn't it? He had a few scenes in "The Child" focusing on his decision to remain with the *Enterprise*, but apart from that, he's largely served as background noise, a familiar face at the helm or someone to trade jokes with Data. I have to admit, I no longer find him as intolerable as I once did. Maybe it's the fact that Wheaton has grown up a little, or that the writers are less interested in forcing Chosen

One narratives down our throat, but when I learned that "The Dauphin" was going to focus on young Crusher's throbbing biological urges, I wasn't immediately filled with self-loathing and despair. I expected it would get rough at times, and the episode does have it's weaker moments, but I figured it'd be watchable, which is not something I would've said about an ep with a similar premise back in season one.

"Dauphin" *is* watchable, and I'd even go so far as to say it's not half bad. Wesley is still somewhat problematic. His super genius status makes it understandable that he wouldn't have the sharpest social skills, but he's never weird or awkward in a way that seems distinct. He's both too generic and too odd to really cohere as a character; his sensitivity and nonthreatening nature should be charming, but instead come across as vaguely inappropriate. You can imagine when the smell gets too bad and they finally bust down the door of his quarters and find all those missing ensigns (well, their skins at least), all Wesley's co-workers will be able to tell anyone is that he had a nice smile, and his uniform was always clean.

Regardless, Wesley hasn't suddenly became one of my favorites on the show, and I'd still rather watch a Picard or Riker or Worf or Data (or Geordi or O'Brien or Troi or... or... Ah screw it, or Pulaski) focused episode that one centered on the Boy Blunder. But that's less to do with my antipathy towards the character than it is with my disinterest in "coming of age" style stories on a big-ass, galaxy-surfing space-ship. I want adventures, and if we're going to focus inward, the character work better justify my attention. Going on past evidence, there wasn't any reason to believe that, with Wesley at the helm, the writers would be capable of justifying anything.

So "Dauphin" was a mildly pleasant surprise. It's a familiar story arc, especially for a sci-fi or fantasy show: a regular character develops an instant, passionate connection with a stranger, then has to deal with the fall-out when that stranger is inevitably killed/sent away/turns into a sentient mass of light at the story's conclusion. Partly that's the "nothing changes" style of most television of *TNG*'s era, but it's also done for dramatic effect. *Romeo and Juliet* is about a pair of teenagers who get the hots for each other and screw around. It only becomes a grand tragedy when people start dying. Not every show merits a body count, but they can exploit the closed nature of their conclusions. We know that Salia, the pretty young woman who catches Wesley's attention via her keen interest in magnetism (not a pun), will be leaving soon, and that makes their brief affair all the sweeter.

Sure, I'll admit it: I found Wesley's stabs at wooing mildly charming. His awkwardness in engineering didn't work (Wheaton is not what I'd call a gifted physical comedian), but I got a kick out his attempts to glean advice from his co-workers. Worf's description of Klingon mating rituals is hilarious ("He reads love poetry. He ducks a lot."), and watching Riker hit on Guinan is actually fairly funny. Even better, the scenes between Wesley and Salia are clumsily endearing. Once he stops falling over himself and stammering, Wesley manages some decent conversation, and Salia's obvious and immediate affection for him make their brief relationship believable, if not exactly one for the history books. (Am I waffling enough here? I don't feel like I'm waffling enough.) I could watch most of the moments between them without wishing harm on either actor, or wishing I could change the channel. It's just that hot.

Of course, "Dauphin" isn't only about sweet, sweet Wesley love. The *Enterprise* is escorting Salia and her guardian, Anya, from the terrible Klavdia III, where the two have lived for most of Salia's life in preparation of her adulthood. Now Salia is on her way to the equally terrible Daleb IV, where she's expected to create peace between warring factions in a way that no one on the *Enterprise* really grasps. Indeed, one of the more notable elements of the storyline here is just how little Picard and the others know about who (or what) they're escorting, and while that makes for some excellent reveals, it does bring into question why the ship is involved in the escort at all. Anya is so paranoid about her charge's safety that it's no surprise when tension arises between her and the crew. Was travelling by a ship with this many aboard really the best option? And why does the *Enterprise* always get stuck with this kind of duty? You'd think there'd be certain Federation vessels specifically designed for this, given how often it occurs.

But like I said, it makes for some excellent reveals. Anya's shape-shifting talents are demonstrated indirectly at first, in that we see Salia talking with various people and creatures in her private rooms before we see the "original" Anya (a middle-aged woman who looks like a nun who just bit on a lemon) change form herself. It's a disorienting choice that helps heighten the mystery and alien-ness surrounding the two; we know something strange is going on, but we're not sure what, and even once we've confirmed that Anya is an "allasomorph," we don't know what that bodes for the future. I like how little exposition we're given to understand what's happening. Salia is important, and by the end, we have a certain idea of just why she's important, but we're never told what she's going to do when she arrives

on Daleb IV. We also don't know how her relationship with Anya began, and I found myself wondering if Anya comes from a race of creatures trained to serve as guardians. (It's at this point during the episode that I made a reference to *Elfstones of Shannara* in my notes. I only mention this here because I still feel guilty.) The forms Anya takes are context-determined, in that she changes to meet the demands of the moment, but not all of the context is explained. I especially dug the brief appearance of a pre-*Twin Peaks* Madchen Amick, as Anya's younger, more sympathetic shape.

We also get some great scenes with Anya playing against Picard and Worf. Anya's rigid insistence that even the slightest possibility of harm to Salia be eliminated puts her at odds with other ship's personnel (most notably, she wants to kill one of Pulaski's patients for having a potentially communicable disease), and we get one of those "Let's show how strong the alien threat is by having it kick Worf's ass" fights you guys have been talking about. This pays off later, though, as Worf and Anya's conversations finally reveal a mutual respect, from one security officer to another. (Also gotta love how furious Worf gets at losing.) My favorite moment in the episode, though, comes from an exchange between Picard and Anya, after Anya does her quick-change routine in front of the crew for the first time. "Your powers are infinitesimal compared to mine," she sneers. Picard's response: "Yes that may be, but you *will* obey my orders."

Salia and Wesley make goo-goo eyes at each other in the holodeck, and over chocolate mousse, but of course it isn't meant to be. In fact, the show goes out its way to make Salia's final departure from the ship as definitive as possible, short of killing her outright. We're informed that Daleb IV is so hostile that human life couldn't possibly exist there, and it requires a prohibitive amount of energy to send a message from orbit strong enough to contact the planet's surface. There's something cowardly in this, I think. Relationships end all the time without needing dramatic contrivance, and Wesley's uneasiness about Salia's shape-changing abilities could've led to an interesting sequel down the road: how do you make things work with a different species? (I'm not entirely kidding here.) "Dauphin" is a little too sweet for its own good, spending too much time on romance when it could've been dealing with more interesting questions, but for what it is, it's not bad. Given it's subject, that's more than I would ever have hoped for.

Grade: B

"Contagion"

Well, this one is really just a more developed (and better structured) retake on the first season episode, "The Arsenal of Freedom." We've got a mysterious planet, incredible technology, and deadly danger, but we also have a third act, so I don't mind a second try. At least this one isn't a fable about how weapons are bad and the more deadly we become, the more we risk self-destruction. In fact by the end of the episode, Picard theorizes that the Iconians, the mysterious race that Captain Donald Varley gave his life (and the lives of everyone about his ship, the *Yamato*) to find, were actually a peaceful people who've been slandered by history. Sure, an Iconian probe is responsible for the *Yamato's* destruction, as well as the near-destruction of the *Enterprise* and a Romulan vessel, but that's more of a software glitch than any deep-rooted hostility. Sort of like if Microsoft ran a planet--it would only force its software down the throats of neighboring systems out of *love*.

After the intermittently drippy "Dauphin," it's nice to have some wall-to-wall action again, and "Contagion" starts fast. Picard gets a distress message from Varley: the *Yamato* is suffering severe technical problems, and they're in bad need of assistance. Unfortunately, the *Yamato* is in the Neutral Zone, which means riding to the rescue entails a certain level of risk. (Hey, remember the Kobayashi Maru?) Picard takes the chance, though, and risks the *Enterprise*, arriving just in time to chat briefly with Varley before the afore mentioned technical problems cause the ship to explode.

I've gone on at some length about *TNG's* more thoughtful storytelling approach, but there's a brief scene here that's worth pointing out. In just a few seconds it manages to convincingly demonstrate how good Picard is at his job, and how thoroughly his crew is prepared to support him. (You can also see this in "Where Silence Has Lease," but in that case, it's the focus of quite a few scenes, whereas the moment in "Contagion" is delivered almost incidentally.) Picard has already explained that Varley is a good friend, and their final conversation is, if not really warm, the sort of open banter you'd expect from old comrades. Then the *Yamato* explodes, and in the next instant, as debris hurtles outward, Picard orders the shields up.

It doesn't sound like much, but shocking as that explosion is, there's something wonderfully cold-blooded in Picard's response. We don't see him break down over Varley's death, although his willingness to continue the man's quest is probably connected to their friendship, and we don't get a passionate outburst in the moment. Later in the episode, Wesley comes to see the captain for a chat about the tragedy, and Picard explains that grief and duty don't often make comfortable bedfellows. The unhesitating, flat inflection of that "Shields up" demonstrates this more clearly than any monologue, though. In its way, it's a gutsy choice. The Wesley scene tries to soften this, but the main reality stands: we don't see Picard weaken. We don't see him stagger back, and we don't see him react as we ourselves would when confronted with such disaster.

Obviously, there's a lot more episode after this (in fact, that entire scene takes place during the cold open!). Varley was searching for Iconia, and going by his logs, he found it. There's amazing technology available for the taking--if only he could've found some way to beam to the planet itself. Unfortunately, a probe launched from Iconia's surface just as the *Yamato* made orbit hit the ship with some new operating software, and the resulting crash between the existing system and the invading one created the resulting glitches and eventual explosion. The *Enterprise* nearly gets hit by the same probe when it follows in the *Yamato*'s footsteps, but thankfully Geordi figures out the problem before it's too late and is able to tell Picard to destroy the probe. (For a series of supposedly random accidents, the trials that Geordi goes through attempting to get to the bridge are both improbable and hilarious.) Too bad that in downloading Varley's logs, our heroes have already managed to infect their ship...

While the main storyline here is too similar to earlier episodes to stand out, the consequences of the *Enterprise*'s slow meltdown make for fun viewing, especially once Picard beams down to the planet with Worf and Data, leaving Riker in charge of the ship. Riker's increased frustration at his inability to successfully defend against potential Romulan attack is hilarious without defusing the tension, and the scene in which the *Enterprise* fails to fulfill any of Number One's commands is a nice piece of farcical suspense. It's always good to have the Romulans back, even if their uniforms still look silly. The strained diplomacy between Riker and the Romulan captain, neither one exactly operating on the level but both unwilling to admit they might be at fault, makes a good dynamic. (I could be wrong there. Do we know what the rule is on rescue missions into the Neutral Zone? Obviously it's risky, but is there

official regulation against it? At the very least, Picard's justification for hanging around is suspect. I'm not sure there's that much danger of an inter-stellar incident, especially once Varley's logs show the probable connection between the *Yamato's* malfunctions and that probe.) I love the ending, too, with Riker passing on the secret to beating the probe programming to the Romulans, then prudently ordering the *Enterprise* into warp in case the Romulans aren't able to act on this information. This would've worked better if we hadn't had that last shot of the Romulans leaving orbit, though; I'd rather have their survival be more ambiguous.

I wasn't as thrilled about Picard, Worf, and Data's Iconian adventure. Wandering what's basically a haunted house for an entire civilization is a neat idea, albeit a routine one for this show and *TOS*, and Picard's decision to risk everything in order to make sure the Iconian tech doesn't fall into Romulan hands is sound. It's just that the Iconians themselves don't have a whole lot of personality in their absence, and their magical doorway machine is too much of an afterthought, created as a form of nonviolent, but potentially incredibly dangerous, equipment to justify Picard's decision to blow everything up. The problem is that, as entertaining as the episode often is, the explosion of the *Yamato* is the undeniable high-water mark, and that happens before we get the opening credits. It doesn't ruin "Contagion," and the knowledge that the probe's infection has already taken so many lives does raise stakes through the episode, but it makes the solid plotting seem uninspired. Still, Picard winding up on the Romulan bridge near the end was pretty genius.

Grade: B+

"The Royale"

Now this one, I remembered. Much of the first two seasons of *TNG* is a blur to me now. I'm sure I watched most of it growing up, and I know I marathoned the first season at least once, but only the occasional stray detail sticks out. That evil oil slick, or Moriarty, or the alien phasing in and out in "Where No One Has Gone Before," I knew I'd seen those before, but I couldn't remember how they fit into anything. This one, though, I remembered: the mystery, the setting, the big reveal, those revolving doors that kept spinning you back to where you started. Whenever I thought about *TNG*, I always wound up thinking about "The Royale," not because it was the best episode I'd seen, but

because something about it just stayed with me long after other, better storylines faded. Watching it now, it's a lot smaller than I remembered. The heroes are never all that worried about their safety, the "fictional" people who inhabit the Royale aren't that threatening as they once were, and the setting is less a claustrophobic trap than a minor inconvenience. "The Royale" in my mind was a leering carnival of meta-commentary and the damned. "The Royale" on my television is a moderately entertaining diversion.

I think it comes down to the fact that I'm a sucker for stories built into stories. "Royale" is basically a holodeck episode: a group of characters is trapped in a fake environment based on a fictional world, and they have to figure out a way to follow the rules just long enough to find an escape hatch. What makes it different from, say, "The Big Goodbye" or "Elementary, Dear Data," is that the paperback noir that served as the inspiration for this particular fake environment is one that our heroes openly and repeatedly mock. Unlike Picard's Dixon Hill fetish, or the very real works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, nobody on the *Enterprise* considers *Hotel Royale* by Todd Mathews to be a good book. In fact, they go out of their way to tell us it's terrible, and it's awfulness actually serves as the punchline for the episode's grimmest joke.

While this may not seem like a huge departure from standard 'deck eps on the surface, it demonstrates a level of self-consciousness that frees Tracy Torme, the episode writer (who also gave us "The Big Goodbye," among others) from having to pretend that the fake world we're watching should be anything but laughable. One of "Goodbye"'s weaknesses is that its detective noir pastiche was never all that convincing or distinctive, and yet Picard never shut up about how amazing everything was. That meant getting distracted every time our expectations were disappointed, which happened nearly every scene. Here, though, all we see down in the hotel that doesn't center on Riker, Data, and Worf, is *supposed* be lousy. Sure, it's not demonstrably worse (or better) than what we saw in "Goodbye," but here its shallowness works to the story's advantage. It means we're all in on the gag.

The *Enterprise* gets wind of some strange ship debris in the upper atmosphere of an unmapped planet. Beaming a piece aboard, they soon determine it's part of an American space ship launched in the 21st century, a fact that amazes Picard, given that us lowly 21st century folks didn't have the technology for interstellar crafts. The planet the ship crashed on is incapable of supporting human life, but a scan finds one area that is safe to beam down to. Riker

and his merry men do so--and, briefly, let us question the sanity of beaming down, without any protective suit, into such a hostile environment. Sure the scans say it's safe, by why not send a test drone out to be sure? Or wear a hat or something. (Or send a security officer...)

Anyway, the away team finds a black, empty space, surrounded on all sides by "ammonium storms," and, in the center of the darkness, a single revolving door. It is, unsurprisingly, a cheap looking effect, but I like it--sometimes cheap looking effects can be even spookier than a more realistic scene might be, although this is definitely a your-mileage-may-vary kind of moment. Through the door, there's a hotel, with gambling and a sinisterly smarmy concierge (Sam Anderson, aka Bernard from *Lost*) and some moderate intrigue. Everyone acts like this is perfectly normal, and Riker, Data, and Worf are labelled as "foreign gentlemen." Everyone acts like outside is just as normal as inside. No one seems to want to go home.

I was talking about a grim joke, right? According to Data's tricorder, none of the people in the hotel are recognizable "alive." He does, however, find human DNA in one of the hotel's rooms: a corpse centuries dead. It's an astronaut from the ship the *Enterprise* found earlier. Aliens grabbed the ship, killing all of its inhabitants but Colonel Richey, and then, either to study or to make up for their interference, the aliens tried to create some recognizable environment for Richey to live in. Instead of scanning his memories or asking him what he wanted, though, they copied the details of the crappy paperback somebody had brought along for the trip, trapping Richey in a hack novel for the last 38 years of his life. And even now, with Richey long dead, the illusion persists. The aliens themselves are most likely long gone, and there's no way of knowing if the phantoms in the Royale have any kind of consciousness, but they play out the same tired routines over and over again, with no audience to suffer through them.

"Royale," corpse-aside, keeps a light tone, with lots of bad comedy between Data and some of the gamblers, and lots of complaining about the crappy source material. So it's fairly easy to overlook the underlining premise, and it doesn't really work as well as it might've. The resolution is half-clever. Riker realizes that the only way out is to pass themselves off as the "foreign investors" who buy the hotel in the novel's climax. This makes sense, but it doesn't really go far enough. Apart from their inability to leave, the away team is never put in any danger, and the brief

communications break between them and the *Enterprise* is solved much too quickly. In order for this one to have lived up to potential, there needed to be an obstacle to the "foreign investors" plan, something more compelling than "the dice are loaded and Data has to fix them." The way it now stands, we're relying too much on goofiness that isn't that funny, with a potentially powerful, unsettling plotline dangling off to one side. It's watchable, but I can't help wishing it had lived up to my dreams.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- "Fate. Protects fools, little children, and ships named *Enterprise*."
- Watching "The Royale," I kept hearing the line, "There is no way out of here!" in my head. Took me a second to realize my brain was quoting *Manos: The Hands Of Fate* at me for some reason.
- Troi gets nervous during "Contagion" because everyone on the ship is so tense. There's a probably a joke there, but right now I'm too tired to make it. Anyone?
- Next week, it's "Time Squared," "The Icarus Factor," and "Pen Pals."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Time Squared"/"The Icarus Factor"/"Pen Pals"



By [Zack Handlen](#)

Jul 1, 2010 10:00 AM

"Time Squared"

You've seen *Primer*, right? Of course you have. In case it's been a while: *Primer* is about a couple of guys who invent time travel. This is not, as such, an incredibly original plot-line. What makes the movie so great (and it is great) is that it takes this concept as a way to examine what happens to a person who discovers that every action is rewritable. There is a cost for the rewriting, but when the reward is so incredible, who really pays attention to how much they're paying? *Primer* dealt with the seductive allure of the perfect moment, of how the ability to refine every interaction means losing sight of the life that brought you to them in the first place. It also addresses one of the major concerns of time travel: what do you do when there's suddenly a spare you?

"Time Squared" isn't anywhere near as complex as *Primer* (which I've seen six or seven times, and still haven't entirely worked out), but I found myself thinking of the movie while watching the episode. Both deal with

duplicates, and both deal with one character's obsessive need to get one decision absolutely, unquestionably correct. The big difference here is that, in *Primer*, the choices the protagonists fixated on were largely selfish. In "Squared," Captain Picard is trying to unravel his future in order to save the lives of everyone on board the *Enterprise*.

Before we can get to that, though, it's time for another round of "Get To Know Your Characters." Instead of a poker game, Riker has the whole sick crew over to his place for some good old fashioned home-cooking. It's kind of charming, in that endearingly dorky way that *TNG* has, and what's curious is that the scene plays out as a simple vignette with no real connection to the rest of the episode. Riker explains to Data the value of hands-on cooking, then promptly defeats his point when the meal (an omelette made of magical space eggs) turns out terrible.

"Squared" isn't about authenticity, or the value of human agency, apart from the vague way just about every episode is, and since the story focuses mostly on Picard, we're not even getting immediately relevant character work. It doesn't seem like padding, though. It's sillier than it needs to be (haha, Worf eats the meal everybody hates because Klingons are crazy!), but I like the idea that the writers are getting comfortable enough to throw in something like this almost on a whim. I'm a big fan of tight pacing, but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate a good hang-out scene as much as anybody.

The story proper doesn't really get started until the *Enterprise* receives a signal from a shuttlecraft, dying and adrift across their path. One tractor beam later, the 'craft is in the ship's docking bay, and, well, something funny is going on. The rescued ship is the exact same make and model as one of the *Enterprise*'s own shuttles, right down to the ID number and markings. It gets worse, because inside this curious copy is another duplicate, and a far more disturbing one: an unconscious Jean-Luc Picard. (God bless Riker's pragmatism. On seeing the body, he calls to the Picard he just left on the bridge, just to make sure it wasn't some weird sort of game.)

TNG has screwed around with time before, and it will again, but one of the things that makes "Squared" stand out is its essential simplicity. We're given an explanation for presence of Picard-2, but the explanation only goes so far; there's no indication that the energy vortex is doing this intentionally, although that's certainly possible, and there's no direct connection between the fate of Picard-2's *Enterprise* and Picard-2's jaunt, apart from the fact that the vortex which destroys the ship must've also thrown the doomed captain back for a second try. (Or a third, or a

fourth. For all we know, this particular loop could've played out a thousand times before one Jean-Luc made the right choice. Since our Picard's final decision is made based on the information he gets from Picard-2, it's probable that this is only the first iteration, but still. Fun to think about, right?) That weakens "Squared" somewhat, because it relies too much on the "outer space is magical" concept that gave us all those damn godlike beings in *TOS*. Hard sci-fi isn't a requirement for great storytelling, but it would've been nice if we'd gotten a little bit more rationale than "just cuz."

Yet this simplicity also allows us to focus most of our attention on Picard, and, as we've learned, that's not a bad idea. There's a lot of fun puzzle solving beforehand (getting thrown out of sync with his natural time puts Picard-2 all out of whack, as well as essentially reversing the electronics on his shuttlecraft)(given that we've seen people travel through time before in this universe and not have similar problems means this is sort of a continuity oddity, but let's just squint and say it has something to do with the energy vortex that caused all the trouble in the first place), but once Geordi and Data manage to get access to the shuttlecraft's logs, the situation clarifies to a terrifying degree: we see Picard-2's *Enterprise* blowing up inside this sort of space tornado. So wherever Picard-2 came from, he's the only one left, and the current *Enterprise--our Enterprise*, essentially--is already on a path to potential doom.

There's the usual discussion about what to do next; like I said, "Squared" puts most of the decision making squarely on Picard's shoulders, which shows you just how important the captain is to the ship. Riker may do a lot of the standard orders while both men are on the bridge, but it's Picard who has the final say when the situation comes to a head. It's odd, in a way, that Picard would have such a personal stake in resolving the conflict, since to all intents and purposes, he's the only person who'll survive the coming catastrophe, but it also makes sense. The captain who goes down with his ship isn't just a noble ideal, it's a philosophy based on a deep sense of responsibility and dedication. To suddenly find out that there's possible future in which all your friends die is awful, but to know that you somehow survived, and that your survival looks like you actually voluntarily ran from danger... for a man like Picard, for anyone of reasonable virtue, that would have to be unbearable.

So Picard isn't a very happy man for much of "Squared," and the episode works best when it shows him struggling with the problem. His treatment of his other self is fascinating, because he starts off in a poor temper and just gets

angrier and angrier as his dilemma becomes clearer. Here is a way for him to vent all his self-doubt and guilt, at a person he can blame for all the failings he suspects in himself. Once the vortex manifests, and Picard finally realizes what drove Picard-2 to leave his *Enterprise*, that the motives were the opposite of selfish cowardice, that fury eases off, but he still shows precious little mercy to his own future. That's some sharp characterization. There's no team-up between the two, no hugging or chance for Picard-2 to realize he'll actually be able to save the ship he'd seen destroyed. There's just interrogation, demands, and finally-

"Squared" has a few dull pockets. Troi and Pulaski's discussion of Picard's mental state is conceptually interesting but not really necessary, and the episode could've used another complication or two. The fact that there are only two options at the end for Picard to choose from, and already he knows one ends badly, is overly simplistic. Still, this works, and the final scenes between the two Picards rank among my favorites of anything we've yet seen on the show. The stone cold conclusion of that sequence is shocking even when you know it'll have little consequences. Realizing that the only way forward is to prevent Picard-2 from leaving the *Enterprise*, Picard shoots and murders his double, without hesitation. That puts this one over the edge for me, soft science or not. We already knew Picard was a bad-ass. This is the first time we've really seen how far he'll go to do what's necessary.

Grade: A-

Stray Observations:

- You could make a case that, since the energy vortex specifically targets Picard (both versions), this all might be some kind of test or experiment or what have you. But why bother? While I think the vortex could've been better developed, I do appreciate its ambiguity.
- "Release him." "Do you know what you're doing?" "No. Release him."
- According to Data, women are traditionally the food preparers in human households. So, three hundred years in the future and you still have that to look forward to, ladies.

"The Icarus Factor"

I was talking to Mabel the other day. I sez to Mabel, I sez, I do so enjoy watching these episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Mabel sez nothing. (Such is her wont. Mabel is a cat, and I don't own a cat, and it gets complicated from there.) Mabel, I sez, but do you know the one thing the show doesn't have I'd like to see more of? Mabel eagerly awaits my reply. Mabel, I sez, the show needs some more characters with daddy issues. And maybe some crazy futuristic type sports. Mabel can only bask in awe at my genius, before I remember she doesn't exist and realize I should probably go back on my meds.

Maybe I've been too spoiled by a run of decent to good episodes, but "The Icarus Factor" really killed my good buzz from "Time Squared." It's pedantic, treacly, and uninspired, and despite the occasional bright spot, plays way too much like a generic TV drama, full of hand-holding music cues and predictable psychology. Which is a shame, because the *idea* behind "Icarus" actually isn't half-bad. Instead of one main storyline, abutted by a subplot or two, we've got an entire episode that's largely populated with character beats and low-key drama. It's the sort of thing you'd never see on *TOS*, and it's something I still think *TNG* could do well, because that easygoing, friendly tone does have a definite appeal. The danger doesn't have to be life-threatening to make us want to spend time with these people, and there's an experimentalism here I respect in trusting our affection for the characters is strong enough to make us willing to endure a little soap opera. The problem is, there's a *lot* of soap opera here, and it's far too mundane to be enjoyable.

We've heard a few things about Riker's childhood (just last episode we found out that he learned to cook because his mom was gone and his dad didn't want the job), but in "Icarus," we finally get to meet the man behind the legend, Kyle Riker, father, lover, and sometime jerk. Before I go any further, I would like you to imagine how this scenario will play out: Riker's dad comes aboard the *Enterprise* to see his son after a 15 year separation. There is some tension. Now... just picture what comes next. No, I'm not giving you any more than that. Trust me on this one.

If you imagined lots of resentment, refusal to openly discuss emotions, discussions of pride and abandonment, and a resolution which relies on physical violence, here, have some cake. Kyle Riker (Mitch Ryan, who mostly makes me

think of *Dharma & Greg*) is that oh so reliable of Dad Types, the Emotionally Unavailable But Still Caring Deep Down Guy who gets a lot of lady love, but can't seem to win the affections of the one person who matters the most. Now, the idea of a man who has difficulty expressing himself or showing vulnerability isn't so horrible that it couldn't have worked here. There's a reason the type keeps coming up again and again, and it's not just because screenwriters can't afford good therapists. It makes for believable conflict, it means that actual connection has to be earned, and it can, when done well, make for good drama. That is not the case here. Ryan isn't a bad actor, and Riker's open contempt for the man is darker than the interpersonal conflict usually gets on the series. Only, the conversations between them are horribly written. Just god-awful.

Plus, there's Kyle's relationship with Pulaski. I have no idea what to do with that. I'm not even sure I dislike it, because I've eased up on my Pulaski complaints, and it's interesting to see her in a context that actually makes her close to vulnerable that doesn't involve a lot of really stupid decisions. It just seems weirdly extraneous to everything else, like the writers wanted to give Kyle something to do when he wasn't glaring at his son, and this is the best way they could think of to humanize him. *TNG* has dealt with old flames before, and this one isn't embarrassing, but it is... odd. Kyle is friendly with everyone on the *Enterprise* and he's fooled around with the ship doctor? And yet he hasn't seen Will in fifteen years. Okay then. We're supposed to think he's a hero because Pulaski gives a speech about this time that Kyle was on a space station where everybody else died, only he lived because he really, really wanted to. That doesn't make him sound like a hero, though. Just lucky. (Or else a murderer with a very clear notion of the importance of eye-witness accounts.)

There's also a plot about Worf being in a bad mood, and Wesley deciding it's his job to fix that bad mood. It's hilarious, although not always in the way that's intended. After all the nice things I've tried to say about the character recently, Wesley returns to full irritant mode here, badgering Worf until the poor guy snaps, then badgering Geordi and Data till they agree to figure out what made Worf so irritable. (A theory: maybe the pale pink blur that keeps whining by his ear, perilously close to punching range.) It's a storyline that seems more suited to a children's TV show than *TNG*, full of goofy attempts at friendship and caring, and a complete disregard for personal space. The only person Worf comes close to expressing his problems to is Riker, and Riker is too busy with his own issues to

help. I can understand the need for a psychologically sound security officer (although Worf is far saner than Tasha Yar ever was), but isn't part of respecting someone giving them some space to occasionally have a bad day?

Thankfully, the resolution of this plot is one of the episode's highlights, so all this buzzing and interfering isn't entirely for naught. Wesley learns it's all about the tenth anniversary of Worf's coming of age, and so everybody gets together to give Worf a surprise party in the holodeck complete with physical torment and growling. There's something very satisfying in seeing Worf's human friends, with all their good intentions, utterly baffled by the masochistic intensity of Worf's needs. Yet they respect them anyway. No one tries to talk him out of the ritual, no one encourages him to seek counseling or maybe find a job that doesn't depend on his even temperament and focus. If Wesley's badgering plays as too childish and naive to make much sense, at least the result reminds us that, nosiness aside, these are characters who take the Prime Directive seriously in all aspects of their lives. Just because they don't understand something doesn't mean they don't grasp its importance.

There's a goofy final showdown between Riker and Riker, playing a game called "anbo-jytsu," which looks like Ultimate Fighting for people terrified of the possibility of direct physical contact. Riker, Jr, yells at his dad, realizes his dad has been cheating in the game for years, lessons are learned, and manly vows of love exchanged, and so forth. Oh, and Riker turns down the chance to be the captain of his own ship, which I didn't mention earlier because really, I can't imagine thinking he would accept. Oh, and there were some problems in Engineering, and we learned we should always trust Data. There's not really much to discuss here beyond that.

Grade: C+

Stray Observations:

- Grade-wise, this is on the line for me. I wanted to rate it higher because I really, really loved Worf's big scene, but the rest of it was pretty dreadful.
- In case you were wondering what to feel when Riker says goodbye to Troi, the music helpfully reminds you to be sad.

"Pen Pals"

Man, if you ever wanted an episode that perfectly demonstrated the best and worst of *TNG*, "Pen Pals" is... well, there might be better examples, but "Pen Pals" is certainly high on the list of potential candidates. On the one hand, we've got an interesting science-based problem to solve (it may also be a ridiculous problem, but anything is better than "Oh great, that shiny thing screwed us over again"), we've got characters using research and reasoning to find that solution, we've got some heavy discussion over the morality of the Prime Directive, and we have planets covered in lava. I love me a good planet covered in lava. (Although *Revenge of the Sith* can just go straight to hell. "She lost the will to live" my ass.) On the other, less exciting hand, we've got a lot of sentiment, a lot of hand-holding and lesson learning, and a frustrating refusal to examine consequences.

Maybe this was part of an ill-conceived attempt to make the show more family friendly? I dunno, but between this and the "Wesley bugs Worf" subplot in "Icarus," it's hard to ignore the bland kiddie vibe. Not only do we have Data making friends with an alien girl over ham radio, we also have Wesley learning how to be a man in the mean old world of telling people what to do. Even worse, we get a five minute scene with Picard and the others discussing how their guidance of the Crusher brat should progress, as if this was somehow a storyline we've all been aching to return to. Yes, I remember that Picard and Riker said they would help Wesley along, but he seems to be doing a fine job of getting up in people's business all on his own. I'm not sure encouraging to meddle further is really necessary. (Unless this is part of a plot to just keep him out of everyone's hair for a while? Maybe Worf filled out some forms.)

I did like the business with Picard and his horse, at least. The glimpses we get of the captain's personal life are always welcome, if slightly amusing in the lengths the writers will go to in order to differentiate him from Kirk. ("Look, he's gentle, goddammit! He's cultured! If he ever had sex with a green-skinned chick, he'd totally know what wine to order at dinner, pre-banging. And he'd probably smoke a clove cigarette, post-bang.") Also, the elementary school kid in me got a kick out of the inadvertently hilarious dialog between Picard and Troi: "So you like horses for the romance." (Well, it is an awful long time between star-bases, and Riker won't always wear the

blindness I got him.) "It seems some creatures have the capacity to fill spaces you never knew existed." (...no comment.)

Then we get into the stuff with the planets melting, which is theoretically cool but really just serves as a way to tie together our two storylines: Data and his friend, and Wesley and his learning, um, things. Data adjusts some equipment to listen to distant radio signals, and ends up chatting with a girl from a pre-space-age culture. That's strictly not good, but Data assures Picard that he did his utmost to make sure the little girl, Sarjenka, had no idea who she was talking to. Then Sarjenka started complaining about earthquakes and volcanoes, and Data realized that her planet, Drema IV, ("Dream for," cute, guys) was in danger of the same fate that had already ruined other planets in the system. And that's when it gets tricky.

The Prime Directive dictates non-interference. Going strictly by orders, Picard and his crew should leave Sarjenka, her people, and all of Drema IV to its fate. But Sarjenka is really cute! Well, she's cute sounding, anyway. And she's just a little kid! Well, she's just-a-little-kid sounding, anyway. Picard and the others debate the rightness of involvement, and while it's nice to have the issue openly argued, there's something cheap about the essential simplicity of the conflict. Stewart does a good job trying to make his decision seem more weighty and important than it really is, but what this comes down to is that a child is in danger, and no hero on this show would ever turn their backs on that kind of need. "Pals" goes out of its way to make sure this decision to betray their core ethos is as easy for the character as it possibly could be, even allowing Pulaski to memory wipe the kid and leave a clean slate behind. Instead of rational thought and compassion, we get a delicate situation that apparently goes out of its way to make the most desirable choice the easiest one.

Then there's Wesley. In the interest of helping him become a man (Picard should've just signed the kid up for some time on the holodeck nobody talks about), the captain puts him in charge of the team to determine what's causing the global meltdowns. Wesley gets nervous about this, then asks Riker for advice. His first sessions go all right, but one of the scientists talks him out of a test he really feels needs to be done. So he asks Riker for more advice, interrupting the guy in the middle of what has to be a pick-up. Riker states the obvious, Wesley does what needs doing, and everything runs smoothly.

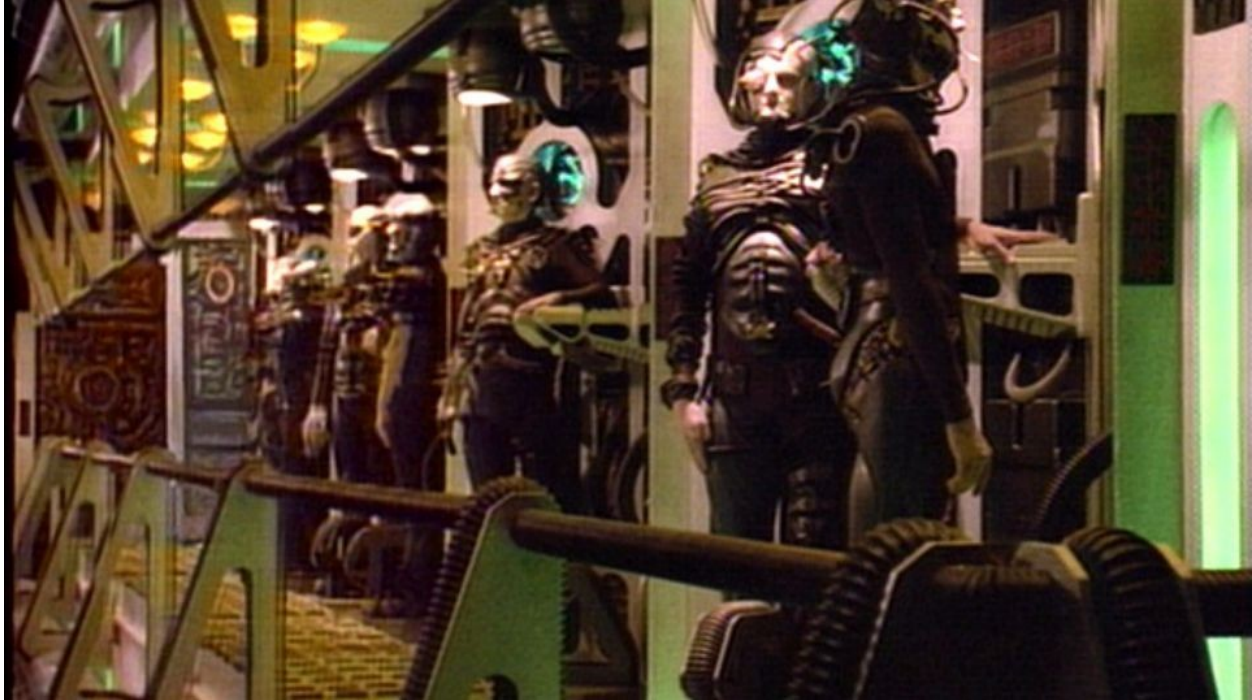
Seriously, would it kill the show to give us even a *little* conflict at this point? The ensign who gave Wesley some lip, why not have him argue his point more strenuously? Why not make taking command something more than simply showing a moderate confidence in your own abilities? And jeez, Data's pet kid... there are so many more interesting ways this could've gone I don't even know where to begin. "Pals" flirts with drama by forcing Data to beam Sarjenka to the ship, thus violating the PD as well as countless other potential biohazard restrictions (yes, the magical transporter could've removed any troublesome disease vectors, but there's no guarantee). Sarjenka, for her part, is frightened by the *Enterprise*, and clings to Data, so I'll give them points for letting her act like a little kid even when it made her annoying.

Apart from that, though, she's as stereotypically sweet as they come. Wesley's team figures out what's causing the disruptions (dilithium crystal fever, apparently), works out a way to stop them, and the day is saved. And that is pretty much that. It's hard to argue against what Picard and Data and the others do here, because it's an action with purely positive results. Unless we get an episode a few seasons down the line in which Sarjenko, having somehow regained her memory, has turned into a warrior queen and murders anyone who dares scoff at her tales of albino sky gods, I'm not seeing a down side. That's weak. Moral quandaries are only difficult when they allow us no clear, reasonable solution, and drama is created when good people are forced to make impossible choices. This was just a lot of back-slapping and day-saving, and, while I'm sure everyone involved was proud of themselves, it was kind of a snooze to watch.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- Uneven batch of episodes this week, but I'm glad we're getting more of Chief O'Brien in the transporter room.
- Picard's "Ooops" to Data is rather brilliantly done.
- Next week, it's "Q Who?," "Samaritan Snare," and "Up The Long Ladder."



By [Zack Handlen](#)

Jul 8, 2010 10:00 AM

"Q Who?"

It's easy to get lost in the wild. Call it the arrogance of the path. You see the trail under your feet, you follow it for miles through thick forest growth, and after so many steps, you get to feeling sure of yourself. The path is important, but surely it's your native wit and instincts that have gotten you this far. You are prepared for the occasional crash of branches in the distance, the stray rocks, the signs pointing forward so caked in moss and sun baked it takes careful detective work to read them. You brought a good supply of snacks, you're wearing proper shoes, and the blister on your left heel, well, that's the price of having an adventure. After a while, you look through all the greenery and you think, I don't really need the trail, do I? There's a hill over there I wouldn't mind seeing the other side of, or that maple tree a few hundred yards off that looks like easy climbing. What's a day in the woods without a little risk.

So you step off the path in the boots you bought mail order and your good thick slacks are stained brown in seconds. You trudge through mud you didn't notice, and the moisture seeps into your wool socks and you sweat. The swarm of flies around you grows so thick that you can taste bug whenever you open your mouth and the buzzing becomes a never-ending howl. The hill is taller than it seemed, the maple tree is dead inside and groans at your touch, and you're getting sick of this. You already finished the Gatorade and the granola bars you brought, and the pack straps rub your shoulders. The path really was important, because the path was the way back, and having it beneath you meant all these difficulties were simply irritants to be endured. Now they're something else. And then you realize you aren't entirely sure what direction you started out from, and when you try and backtrack you go at least twice the distance you came in without finding your own trail. The crashing sound is closer now. You want to run, but you're already sinking.

I love the moment when a good show becomes great. I love feeling all your investment and increasingly desperate optimism suddenly pay off. We've had good *TNG* episodes before this, but "Q Who?" goes that one extra step, and finally, finally takes the show out from behind *TOS*'s shadow once and for all. There'll be backtracking in the weeks to come, no doubt (and we've got one fairly painful episode to look at in a few paragraphs), but before now, it was possible to legitimately question if *TNG* could ever stand on its own feet. That is no longer an issue. From now on, even when the writing sucks and the characters are annoying and the special effects insult our ocular abilities, we know for certain that the series is at least capable of kicking some serious ass.

Admittedly, "Who?" doesn't start with a bang. The title is cutesy, and our first scene is all about introducing the new hottie ensign in Engineering, a motormouth named Sonya who talks Geordi's ear off before spilling hot chocolate on a less than amused Captain Picard. Given that the episode marks our first introduction to the Borg, I half-wondered if this wasn't all a set-up to kill Sonya in the third act and create some pathos, but she's actually a semi-recurring character. (I think "Who?" is a rare case where such a cliched structure might've worked, given how rarely people die on the show by now. Still, the almost incidental horror of the crew deaths we *do* get works fine on its own.) Intentionally or not, a scene like this provides a false sense of security, because it's nothing we haven't seen before. Geordi is friendly, the new personnel is gawky and excited, and Picard is just barely polite. Quell surprise.

It gets interesting fast, though. Q reappears, snatching Picard off the *Enterprise* and onto a shuttlecraft in order to follow the letter of the law of his previous "stay away from this ship!" promise. Q has been booted out of the continuum, and wants to join up with Picard's crew. He argues that he'd be a valuable, even essential asset, with all his crazy semi-magical powers and willingness to insult Worf. Picard understandably balks at the idea. Q insists, "You're not prepared for what awaits you." Picard disagrees, and what makes this scene (and the rest of the episode) work so well is that we're fully on his side. We've seen the *Enterprise* struggle against all manner of aliens, god-like beings, and internal strife, and while there's been the occasional tense situation, no challenge has ever proven insurmountable. In fact, that's one of the central tenets of the *Trek* universe: intelligence, compassion, and force of will are enough to solve any problem. As Guinan points out, that's what human's do--we adapt, and we learn, and sooner or later, we will kick ass.

So Q decides to prove his point, by throwing the *Enterprise* 7,000 light years off course and forcing the crew to face an enemy they can't beat. And you know why "Who?" is brilliant? Because for once, Q is *right*.

Before they became the vampires of the *Trek*-verse (I would totally read a *Twilight*-esque series about a whiny teenage girl and the cyborg who wants to utterly erase any vestige of her individuality. You wouldn't even have to change much from the original books), the Borg were terrifying. They're zombies, which is part of it--each individual body is valueless, they can't be reasoned with directly, and whenever you kill one, another follows soon after. It gets worse, though. Zombies don't work together, they don't handle tools well, and they don't have a philosophy beyond grabbing and chewing. The Borg have a purpose that is at odds with nearly everything we value about life. They don't parlay, or conquer, or even massacre. They assimilate. They homogenize. And they learn very, very fast.

It's scary to watch how thoroughly ill-equipped our heroes are to deal with such a threat. They try peaceful communication, with no response. There's a great sequence when one of the Borg beams aboard and starts trying to take over the ship. Picard attempts to reason with him, then someone moves to physically restrain the creature, then Worf fires his phaser, first on stun, then on the kill setting. The first Borg dies. Another beams aboard and takes over where the first left off, and this time, when Worf fires his phaser, the Borg has a shield that blocks the beam. It's an

exciting, tense scene, but what really matters is how little attention the Borg pay to any of the *Enterprise* crew. They are irrelevant to the process. Picard asks Guinan, who's had dealings with the Borg before, how to defeat them. "You don't," she says. Given how generally positive her character is, that brutal two word negative is dark stuff indeed.

Things get worse. There's a brief hope when the *Enterprise* manages to do some damage to the Borg ship, but considering the ship's design, it's not surprising that even 20 percent destruction fails to slow them down that much. So we get to the big climax, and we have our expectations. This is when Picard pulls out the big guns, or Data comes up with a clever technical fix, or Wesley is annoyingly perfect, or any of a dozen possible solutions we've come to expect from our heroes. If that had happened, this still would've been a strong episode. The Borg are a creative and effective threat, Q is at his most entertainingly obnoxious, and the stakes are very high indeed.

Instead, though, Picard turns to Q and he begs for help. There's really no nice way to put it. He admits that the *Enterprise* isn't ready to face this danger, and he pleads with Q to save them. You could argue this is a cheat, a weak resolution that betrays an inability on the part of writer Maurice Hurley to come up with a clever twist--and you'd be wrong. "Who?" isn't the best *TNG* episode. It lacks an emotional impact that later storylines would manage. It is, however, the first great episode, because it admits that these humans, who have been walking that path for so long that they seem to have forgotten there ever was a wilderness, can be arrogant, and weak, and that they can be bested. It introduces us to an alien force which for once truly is alien, and it doesn't cheapen the introduction by engineering a conclusion just to let Picard save face. The 18 crewmembers who die here stay dead even after Q brings the ship back home. In the end, Picard learns that there are some dangers that the human spirit can't overcome through ability alone, and that their escape is a temporary one. The Borg know the *Enterprise* is out there. And they're not ones to forget a name.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- Q is really at his best here--his motives are plausible, his theatrics are enthusiastic without becoming overly flamboyant, and De Lancie is gets the most out of some really excellent lines. "The hall is

rented. The orchestra engaged. It's now time to see if you can dance," could've been corny, but it plays very well.

- Hey, Guinan has a purpose! The hand gesture stand-off between her and Q is hilarious, and we have a very different look at her character here: she's still wise and Yoda-esque, but there's a deep sadness behind it, and, once the Borg show up, her resignation is as unsettling as any histrionics would've been. (Come to think of it, that's also Yoda-esque.)
- Speaking of arrogance, how cocky do you have to be to beam over to an enemy ship with a phaser you already know is ineffective? Riker, Worf, and Data's brief trip to the Borg cube is worth it for the view of all those resting bodies, and the creepy as hell Borg nursery, but Riker puts a lot of faith in his and his men's ability to protect themselves. Which fits in with the rest of the episode, really. (And you gotta love Picard beaming them back to the bridge *immediately* upon realizing that the Borg ship is regenerating.)

"Samaritan Snare"

The other two episodes this week aren't anywhere near the same class as "Q Who?", although I suppose I should be grateful for the order I watched them in. "Snare" is decent, and deals with some of the same themes as "Who?," albeit on a much smaller, less effective scale. "Up the Long Ladder," on the other hand... Well, I appreciate decompression as much as the next man, is what I'm saying. If I'd had to face the Space Irish after hanging out with the Borg, I think I would've stapled a fax machine to my chest and told everyone to call me Locutus.

Anyway, "Snare." We've got two main plots here which don't connect till the finale. There's Picard travelling with Wesley to Starbase 515; and back on the *Enterprise*, there's Riker and company meeting the idiotic Pakleds, who turn out to be not quite as idiotic as they initially appear. (Although even then, they're still pretty dumb.) It's a sign of how far the show has come that even plots as relatively straightforward and, well, uninspired as these go down painlessly. The Pakleds, who look like a bunch of fat clowns out of make-up, are less a race than a physical representation of a satirical construct, but it's not like that's new to the show, and they're less offensive than the

Ferengi. As for Picard's story, it's mundane, and Wesley is as much a sap as ever, but it's always fun to see Patrick Stewart glowering at people.

All right, Picard first--he has a broken heart. Literally. Pulaski is demanding he get a replacement, but Picard refuses to have the work done on ship, because he can't bear the idea that anyone on board know about his weakness. So he hitches a ride with Wesley, who's headed to the Starbase for some kind of Starfleet Academy testing. (He has to prove his work on the *Enterprise* should count for course credit.) There's mild comedy in Wesley being nervous about having to make small talk with a clearly irritable captain, and the kid doesn't do himself any favors with comments like, "You might have made a good father." (That's the line I have in my notes. I can't help thinking "would" makes more sense than "might," but hey, a man has to trust his notes.) I've come to expect this kind of behavior from the character, and while it still makes me wince, it could've been worse.

At least it gives us a chance for back-story. Picard talks about duty and obligation, which isn't a huge surprise, but he also reveals the heart problem, and explains that it stems from his wild and crazy youth, when he got in a fight with some Nausicaans (apparently Robert McCullough is a Miyazaki fan) and wound up with a spear through his chest. It's a nice speech, well delivered, and it gives some context for Picard's obsessive image concerns which generally play as forced drama. Picard doesn't exactly regret his past, but he's aware of the separation between who he was, and who he is, and it's important to him to keep that distinction. Which makes you wonder how much he's still trying to prove, really.

As for the Pakleds, once again we see a commanding officer's confidence getting him (and others) into hot water. The Pakleds show up with a damaged ship, Riker offers to send Geordi over to help with repairs, and when Worf, quite reasonably, objects to sending over the Chief of Engineering to strangers whose true intentions aren't clear, Riker dismisses the warning out of hand. We've seen the *Enterprise* offering assistance to those in need before, so Riker's behavior here isn't out of character, but it's nice that Worf gets a chance to be right for once. The *TNG* crew are far, far more trusting than they really ought to be, and while their willingness to help when they can speaks well of them as people, it's not the best policy to expect everyone else to return that kindness. Riker is all about the bold

choices, and having a race as borderline mentally incompetent as the Pakleds briefly get the better of him makes for a solid reversal.

Like the Borg, the Pakleds are more dangerous than they initially appear, because they "innovate" by stealing the technology they want from their intellectual superiors. But where the Borg's theft is done via advanced weaponry and utter ruthlessness (I'm not even sure "ruthlessness" is the right word, because it implies a disregard for morality, and the Borg are beyond even disregard), as far as we can tell, the Pakleds steal by taking advantage of others' kindness. While Riker is able to find a way to save Geordi without too much trouble (the complicated ruse he puts on was less impressive in action than I was hoping, given the *Sting*-like conning that precedes it), these are still some deeply creepy mofos. They blast Geordi with his own phaser multiple times without any change in demeanor, and I couldn't help wondering how many bodies they buried to get their own ship. Sure, they don't have much of a weapons system, but imagine three or four of the things just charging you at once, and... brrr.

The two plotlines come together when Picard's supposedly safe heart surgery goes wrong, and only Dr. Pulaski has the necessary training to save the day. It's a little silly. The episode would've worked better without forced suspense, and really, might've been better served by jettisoning the Picard story entirely. I can understand needing him off the ship, as Picard would've been more cautious than Riker during the initial dealings with the Pakleds, but I wouldn't have minded a few more turns of the screw on Geordi's kidnapping. We've yet to see a really effective two-storyline episode, but I'll keep hope alive a little while longer.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- Picard gave Wesley a William James book. I was assigned James' *Principles of Psychology* in college, and much like Wesley, I didn't read much of it. (Although I hear it's quite good.)
- Why do so many of the doctors on this show dress like Jeremy Irons in *Dead Ringers*?

"Up The Long Ladder"

And then things just get stupid.

There are a handful of scenes I really enjoyed in "Long Ladder," and they're good enough that I would champion them even if they hadn't stood out in such stark contrast to the rest of this crap heap. Those scenes are: Worf faints, Pulaski treats him, they bond, and she takes part in a Klingon Tea Ceremony. It's excellent. Pulaski's coldness works to her favor, and her clear respect for Worf makes for a strong connection between the characters. The Ceremony itself is fascinating--the tea is poisonous, and while the poison isn't fatal to Klingons, drinking it isn't pleasant. Like most everything else the Klingons do in ritual, it's all about proving one's abilities as a warrior, and Pulaski shows herself more than equal to the challenge when she pre-doses herself with an antidote that makes it possible for her to drink the tea with Worf. In a few minutes, the scene does everything you want out of *TNG*, demonstrating respect for another culture, a sly sense of humor, and an eagerness to explore.

Then there's the friggin Space Irish, who eat up half the running time and plague us with comic relief and tedious stereotypes. I honestly don't really have a lot to say about this. I've been writing about *Trek* for a while now, and I've ranted at length about both *TOS* and *TNG*'s lapses into cultural cliché. There's not much to add here, so this is probably going to be a short review. Go watch "Q Who?" again with the time you'll save. You can thank me later.

All right, once upon a time there were two groups of people who traveled together to the stars in search of a new home. One group wanted to stick with the old ways, full of butter-churning and venereal disease and hateful, shrewish women who are also hot, so it's okay that they're evil. The other group was big on science. Group one ended up with Planet The Quiet Man, group two ended up with Planet Parts: The Clonus Horror, and it's up to the *Enterprise* to rejoin the disparate halves into one destined to implode after the first month whole. Everything is terribly convenient. Riker bangs an attractive woman, we get a lot of horrid comic relief, and we learn Riker really hates clones.

About that hot woman: yeah, Brenna (Rosalyn Landor), the daughter of the clan chief of the Space Irish (who irritated me so much I'm not even going to search through my notes for his proper name), is easy on the eyes, but

that doesn't excuse her being a twerp. I suppose growing up with Paddy O'Predictable as a da would ruin anyone's outlook, but our first introduction to Brenna has her screaming at Picard because she's not happy with the *Enterprise*. Picard gets this look on his face like he's having a Private Moment, and when Riker stays behind to put the moves on the shouty Irish lass, he and Picard exchange a glance that seems to indicate both men know exactly what will happen next. Which could've led to a really nasty, *In The Company of Men* scenario, but instead is meant to convince us that Brenna is irresistible. I'm not seeing it. Sure, the midriff-bearing outfit she wears is striking, and sure, she seems to be fairly easy to impress, but this is a character with two settings: "YOU'RE DOING IT WRONG" and "kissing." I'm probably alone on this, but I find the unpleasantness of the former outweighs the promise of the latter.

The cloning storyline isn't awful. Riker and Pulaski's vehement opposition to the idea of donating their own DNA to the land of Xerox made sense, as did Riker's complete willingness to destroy his clone when he discovers his genetic material was stolen. (Another nice moment here when Riker checks with Pulaski before destroying her clone as well.) I guess there was some kind of point being made about the sterility of one colony needing the chaotic life force of the Space Irish to survive, and how both groups could stand for some moderation of their core principles, but it mostly just felt like two concepts grafted onto one another because neither was developed enough to fill a full episode. There's only so many times you can say that bad comic relief is always painful, and bad ethnic comic relief is worse than that. I'm glad someone working for *TNG* saw *Darby O'Gill And The Little People* at a young age and was forever haunted by it. Maybe if we'd had a few more leprechauns here, I might've had more fun.

Grade: C

Stray Observations:

- Funny how Riker once again falls for the "we could use some help with repairs" trick. At least this time he's the one who gets screwed over and not poor Geordi.
- Oh, and there's talk of how all the men will need to father at least three children with three different women, which everybody gets very excited about. If these Space Irish are supposed to be holding to

the old ways, wouldn't some of them be offended by the enforced promiscuity? And is there any reason why, since the clone colony caves and allows the influx of new blood, that they can't just put the call out for more settlers so the romantic relations don't have to be quite so mathematical?

- Next week, join me as I hopefully find some more interesting things to say about "Manhunt," "The Emissary," and "Peak Performance."



By [Zack Handlen](#)

Jul 15, 2010 10:00 AM

"Manhunt"

We've talked before about how *TNG* has had to work to establish its own identity outside of *TOS*. This is trickier than it looks. Obviously the new series doesn't want to completely cut ties with the old, because that's part of its market base--or, to put it a little less cynically, if the show's creators (excluding Rodenberry who, lets face it, was always a better salesman than he was a creative force, and was likely looking to cash in on the success of the movies) weren't interested in telling stories in the *Trek*-verse, they wouldn't have done a spin-off style show in the first place. Still, they can't spend all their time recreating the past.

"Manhunt" is the kind of episode that *TOS* never really tried. The original show had overtly comic storylines, but even those had an urgency to them. We never had a laid back hour of *TOS*, never just watched the crew doing their business and having lives and so forth. There were a couple scenes of Uhura singing in the common room, but those

were isolated moments in the middle of a bigger, more driving storyline. *TNG*, on the other hand, has already done a few "hang out" episodes, and "Manhunt" is another in the set. There is a premise here, in Lwaxana Troi's sudden overflow of libido, but the consequences are never all that important. The worst that could happen is that she gets upset, or Picard has to hem and haw his way out of an embarrassing misunderstanding. Galactic doings are afoot, but, while I didn't have a stop-watch on me, I feel comfortable saying that Antedean "dignataries" got maybe five minutes out of "Manhunt," and even the climactic revelation of their true purpose was treated as a tossed off gag.

I'm torn. (Thankfully, no nudity and floor-lying required.) I really like the conceptual foundation behind an episode like this one. I think it's a smart way to pace out a season, help strengthen the audience's bond with the crew, and give the *Enterprise* a lived-in feel that the original show never managed. I always get frustrated with people who criticize a series for taking its time, as if character and setting were merely the spoonfuls of sugar we ingest to keep swallowing the ongoing plot. Maybe it's just how I watch television, but I enjoy the occasional low-key entry. Too many, and a show can turn sluggish and meandering, but without any, it becomes far more difficult for a series' world to catch hold of my imagination. (A perfect example of how to do this well came in the last season of *Breaking Bad*. *Bad* is one of the tightest, best paced shows ever made for television, and two-thirds of the way through this year's crazy melange of agony and miscalculation, we got "Fly," which spent nearly the whole running time on the show's two leads and barely moved the main storyline at all. Some viewers complained this was a waste, but it's crucial to the season, because it stops the tidal wave just long enough to remind us the lives that will be lost in all that rushing water.)

So when I complain that "Manhunt" isn't really *about* anything, please don't take that as a criticism of this format in general. It's just, this is a mediocre at best episode, featuring one of the show's most irritating recurring characters, some draggy comic relief, and a bizarre holodeck interlude with Captain Picard's favorite fake private dick.

Lwaxana is slightly toned down this time (which is odd, considering her motivation), but she's still problematic. We learn in "Man" that female Betazoids, once into their middle age, go into a kind of lust-filled frenzy and become obsessed with taking a new mate to expend all their energies upon. This puts me in the strange position of disliking the lady, while at the same time feeling she is being ill-used. We're supposed to find it hilarious that Lwaxana, at the

mercy of her biological necessities, throws herself at every crew-member who is foolish enough to be a human male of breeding age. (Ah, poor Wesley. Someday, your puberty will come.) She has enough control of herself to be moderately discerning, but after bizarrely and inappropriately declaring she and Riker are to be wed, Lwaxana puts the moves on a holodeck bartender because not being able to read his mind is a huge turn-on.

It's silly, and it's not much fun to watch. Are we laughing at her? With her? It's one thing to have Lwaxana be forceful and obnoxious, but here she's being mocked for entering her species' Opposite Day version of menopause, and that's sad. The holodeck joke is a step too far, I think, as it's unbelievable that the woman would have no idea of what a holodeck is, Betazoid or no. It plays as a kind of just deserts for all her interfering on the ship, and I'm not entirely comfortable with that. We've seen Worf's rage issues treated with dignity and respect, so why should Lwaxana's onrush of lust, over which she has roughly the same control as Worf does his anger, be played for broad comedy? That she casually unmasks the Antedean as spies at the end at least gives her some purpose, but this is all very poorly thought out.

About the only clever bit in the episode is during Picard's playtime as Dixon Hill on the holodeck. Picard lounges in his office, various thugs arrive to threaten him, and then he heads to a bar where he learns which novel he's currently participating in. There's no effort to connect this novel with the rest of the episode's storyline (apart from both being about manhunts), but that works. More than the last time we saw Picard play this game, this particular adventure feels like what you'd imagine a computer simulation of a fictional setting *should* feel, as though the edges of the stage lay just beyond the sightlines. Even better are Picard's attempts to force the program into giving him a more relaxed atmosphere. Each iteration the computer tries only makes the situation worse, because the kind of laid-back, just chillin' vibe the captain is searching for simply doesn't exist in Dixon Hill land.

It does exist on *TNG*, but this is a poor example. It's not because Lwaxana is such a brat either. "Manhunt" is just too lazy to be effectively low-key. There are a few fun exchanges and a couple of bright spots, but by the end I found myself wishing I could've stolen a page from the Antedeans' playbook and stayed unconscious for the duration.

Grade: C

Stray Observation:

- It doesn't really start till next episode, but this turned out to be a good week for Worf. His comments on the Antedeans ("What a handsome race") are great.
- Picard just doesn't seem to "get" the holodeck, does he?

"The Emissary"

Most romantic comedies suck. All right, let's be honest, most *movies* suck, things being what they are, and the ratio of suck to good of romantic comedies isn't much worse than that of, say, costume dramas or action flicks. The difference is, the lessons action movies teach us about life tend to be about situations that aren't going to come up in the real world. It would be a bad thing if I shot the least likely murder suspect right off to save myself a third act, but I don't own a gun, and no credible police force in the world is going to accept an application written mostly in highlighters. (Everybody steals my pens at the office.) Rom-coms, though, can mess a person up. Their circumstances are heightened for dramatic purposes, but the basic emotions and problems are ones most people can relate to--generally speaking, we all want somebody to love. And if we start following the lessons we learn in *Sleepless In Seattle* while we're on the road to finding what we want, we can expect a lot of heartbreak, awkward conversations, and the occasional restraining order.

This is why Klingons are awesome. Seriously! We haven't had much of a chance to watch their mating rituals, but between Worf's explanation to Wesley in "The Dauphin," and the sparks between Worf and this week's special guest star, we have a picture of the standard rom-com devices taken to their utmost extremes. The woman is aggressively disinterested in the male, and the male continues expressing adoration while doing his best to avoid bodily harm. It's hilarious, but it's weirdly charming, too, because by making the woman the physical threat, and turning the aggressive pursuit that so many rom-coms demand of their male participants into a polite, noninvasive persistence, the unpleasantness of the scenario is undercut. Is Worf a little pushy here? Maybe. But the object of his affections is never threatened or forced into an arrangement, and she doesn't have to soften her personality too much before the end credits.

"The Emissary" is the kind of episode that makes me view junk like "Manhunt" a little more favorably. "Emissary" is decidedly not a hang out episode--we've got a strong plot, there are stakes, and Worf and K'Ehlyer's relationship is the character focus. Yet all the slower eps that preceded this one have ensured that we care what happens to Worf. He's gone from being a sight gag ("Holy crap, there's a Klingon on the bridge! What's with the face?") to a funny, nuanced personality, and that wouldn't have happened without scenes like the Klingon Tea Ceremony from "Up The Long Ladder." That doesn't redeem the weak spots, obviously. One would hope that it'd be possible to create strong character beats *and* not suck, but it's nice to know there's a little good mixed in with the bad. Even better, the solid quality and care that goes into "Emissary" raises my hopes for next season. This isn't a great episode, but it's damn good, and if it serves as the baseline of quality, we've got some exciting times ahead of us.

Even the hook is cool. A Klingon ship named the *T'Ong* was sent out over seventy years ago on a secret mission. This was well before the Klingon Empire and the Federation decided to play nice, and the crew of the *T'Ong* are in cryogenic sleep, running on deep cover and impossible to contact before they're deep into Federation space. The fear is that they'll blow some outposts up before they realize everybody's friendly now, and given the touchy nature of Klingon honor, explaining the intricacies of the current universal-political situation presents certain difficulties. To this end, Starfleet sends an emissary to explain the situation to the *Enterprise* and hopefully find some way of resolving the issue that results in the fewest deaths possible. That emissary is the aforementioned K'Ehlyer, a half-Klingon/half-human woman who has a history with Worf.

The suspense here isn't that the Klingons will kill some innocents. The *T'Ong* is 70 years old, so it doesn't pose much of a threat to the *Enterprise*. The suspense here is whether or not K'Ehlyer and Worf can figure out a way to stop the newly awakened crew without having to destroy them and their ship. The stakes are moderate, and the real tension comes from watching the two characters bounce off each other in a situation they can't simply walk away from. (Worf tries to get himself excused from the assignment, but Picard nixes the idea.) It's more a question of psychology, and we're invested in the outcome because it has consequences, because the solution isn't readily evident, and because it comes as much from internal as external strife.

K'Ehlyer is interesting. The actress, Suzie Plakson, played a Vulcan in "The Schzoid Man," and her restrained smirk gets more of a work-out here. Her sarcasm grates after a while, but that makes sense. As a half-Klingon, half-human, she believes she got the worst of both species. She deals with this by displaying open contempt for Klingon ways, repeatedly advising Picard that the only way to deal with the *T'Ong* is to destroy them. It's not that she hates the Klingons so much as she hates the intense emotional side of her she associates with her Klingon heritage. She keeps those emotions in tight check, but can't banish them completely, which is why Worf gives her such fits. He's comfortable with his heritage in a way that K'Ehlyer can't quite manage, despite (well, more like because) the fact that K'Ehlyer must've spent more time with Klingons growing up. Plus, there are all those strange feelings his awesomeness inspires in her.

"Emissary" works because Worf and K'Ehlyer's interactions are never forced to the point of artificial drama. A lot of what we see here are familiar rom-com beats, with the initial tension, the banter, the break-through interaction, sex, a separation, and finally a reconciliation. However, most rom-coms don't have a scene where the two near-lovers bond while fighting computer generated monsters. Action movies without number have used adrenaline as a substitute for actual connection, but here the thrill of battle is an integral aspect of the characters. This is how they communicate. The resolution with the *T'Ong* pays off as well as Worf, despite K'Ehlyer's objections, comes up with a solution to the problem that allows everyone to walk away alive. It also lets Worf show off his leadership abilities, and the ladies love those.

So we have a familiar romantic arc here, but done quite well, and we have one of the show's best supporting characters getting a chance to shine. I can't imagine the *TNG* of season one managing this effectively a mixture of psychology and plotting, and it's nice to see we've come this far.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- "Computer--Level Two." Is it weird that that's kind of hot?

- So the Klingons get married right after sex? That's intense.
- Another poker game to start the episode, and this one, with its focus on Worf, is actually relevant to the plot.

"Peak Performance"

I was the foreman on a jury last year. It was a fascinating experience; the case was interesting, and while there were boring spots, it was cool seeing the legal system up close. Being the foreman meant that I was supposed to lead the deliberations when it came time for us to render a verdict. I did a lousy job, I think. I spent most of the trial convinced the defendant was blatantly guilty, and sure that everyone else would agree with me, but they didn't. In fact, I was the only person who didn't want to acquit, and when I realized this, I choked. I thought I'd be able to lead people, and instead I got nervous and talked too loud. I gave up almost immediately on trying to change anyone's minds. We decided on an acquittal. I rationalize this by telling myself that I could've been wrong, and that it's better to err on the side of caution when it comes to guilty and not guilty. It still bothers me though. Not because the defendant got off, but because when I was invested with even a minor amount of responsibility and power, I choked.

Leadership is tricky business. It requires tact, self-confidence, brains, charisma, empathy, and... something else. Something you don't really know until you see it, and something you can't find in yourself until your ass is on the line. That last bit is the killer. You can have all the tools necessary for the job, all the training and the background and the good marks, and then you find yourself standing on the bridge of a starship when a Romulan cruiser decloaks off your bow, and you turn to the ensign at the helm and you just--choke. Riker is a good second in command. He and Picard get on well, compliment each other in the right ways, and Riker's amiability provides a crucial link to the crew. Picard believes in keeping his distance, and Riker, as we've seen, is on friendly terms (and sometimes more than friendly) with the just about everyone on board the *Enterprise*. Riker isn't going to be Number One forever, though. Someday he'll have a ship of his own, and when that day comes, will he be ready for it?

"Peak Performance" is another fun episode. Riker plays a key role, but this is more of an ensemble piece than "The Emissary" was, giving nearly every major character a moment to shine, and once and for all ridding me of my dislike for Dr. Pulaski. (Which is a shame, considering she'll be off the show so soon.) The *Enterprise* is preparing for a war game: Riker, with a skeleton crew of 40, will take charge of an older ship (dig the *TOS* sound effects!) and stage a mock battle to show his effectiveness as captain. An annoying, snobbish alien shows up to tell everyone what they're doing wrong, Wesley Crusher finds a clever way to cheat, and the Ferengi don't actually ruin everything. It's like Christmas in Heaven.

That alien, Sirna Kolrami, (Roy Brocksmith, the man with the fatal sweat in *Total Recall*), is really, really annoying. His race are supposedly brilliant tacticians, but as Worf points out early on, if they're so brilliant no one will challenge them, how do you know their worth? Mainly, Kolrami is around to get on everyone nerves, doubt Riker, and give Data a storyline. We'll get to the Data story in a sec, but Kolrami's criticisms of Riker are important because Riker's success wouldn't mean quite as much otherwise. There's no one on the *Enterprise* we've seen who wouldn't consider Riker more than qualified for command, not even some random one-off introduced just for the episode and then forgotten. It's not necessary to have Riker change anyone's mind, of course. The sudden arrival of the Ferengi means that a failure here would have severe consequences, and not just a Starfleet reprimand. It's just nice to have a stranger tell us someone we like is cool.

It's also nice watching Riker put together his "away team," and seeing how Geordi, Worf, Wesley, and the others deal with the restrictions of their new assignment. I wouldn't have minded a little more of this, because I have a soft spot for team storylines. People overcoming handicaps to achieve a seemingly impossible goal is a well-established genre staple, but when it's done well, as it is here, it's tremendously entertaining. Everybody gets to show-off: with Geordi's help, Wesley figures out how to give their new-old ship warp drive, and Worf comes up with a nifty plan to distract the *Enterprise* when it becomes time for battle. Riker provides encouragement, marshals his forces, and, when it's time to make the tough decisions, stands by his crew. Seriously, if this had been the whole episode, it would've been great. As it is, the confrontation between Riker and Picard lasts maybe three minutes before the Ferengi show up and change the stakes. It's not a bad twist, but given that every battle simulation in the history of

genre fiction has always ended in a "surprise" real battle, I would've liked it if "Performance" had gone a different route.

As for Data's story, well, I said I don't have a problem with Pulaski anymore, and I stand by that. She cons Data into playing a game of Stratagema against Korlami because she wants to see the alien get his butt kicked. When Data loses, he experiences a crisis of faith in himself. Pulaski's manipulations are entertaining, and it's nice to see her loosening up more. Even better, she apologizes to Data after the first match goes poorly. As arcs go, it's minor. The actual gaming is silly (they must have very different concepts of strategy in the 24th century, as that looked mostly like a reflex test), and Data's insecurities are a little Afterschool Special-ish. Still, Data's solution to the problem--to defeat Korlami by playing to tie, not win, and thus wear him down till he gives up in frustration--is sharp. It might have made more dramatic sense to have Data simply realize that you can't win every battle, but at least the resolution here gave us a little credit.

Another solid entry, then. We learn that Riker really can lead (and this *is* handled rather subtly, as Riker himself doesn't do much after choosing his team; the point being that a large part of being a good leader is to know who you need for an assignment, and then getting the most out of them), Wesley is still clever as the dickens, and the Ferengi are still fairly dumb. No major revelations or shocking twists, but very credible work. While episodes like "Q Who?" make *Trek* fans, it's eps like this one that ensure those fans keep coming back. Nothing too flashy, but it gets you where you want to go.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- If you're a fan of *24*, you may have recognized the new ensign in this episode as Glenn Morshower, aka Secret Service Agent Aaron Pierce. Armin Shimerman, who would turn up as Quark on *Deep Space Nine*, plays DaiMon Bractor of the Ferengi ship.

- The wisdom of Captain Picard: "Commander, it is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose. That is not a weakness. That is life."
- Next week, we're going to have a slight change of pace. "Shades of Grey" marks the end of the second season, so I'll be covering that and then giving my overall thoughts on the second season. We'll get into the third season the following week.

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Shades of Grey"



By [Zack Handlen](#)

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"Shades Of Gray"

Clip shows are con games. Really, all narrative fiction is, but whereas most episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* respect that the audience is in on the game (these are actors, those are sets, costumes, that dialog is scripted, Riker's beard can't possibly be so luxurious in real life, etc), "Shades Of Gray" is one hour long middle finger at all us rubes. It suckers you in with maybe ten minutes worth of new plot, and then it turns into a "previously on" reel. It's not even a collection of truly great scenes, either, just random moments with enough tenuous connection to the so-called "real" crisis to let the writers sleep at night. I understand the justification behind a clip show. It's a way to stretch a budget to produce one more episode the producers can't really afford. That doesn't make it any more enjoyable to watch, and it doesn't really excuse its existence. I'd rather see even the worst episode of the series--even "Angel One"--again before I'd willingly watch this.

The excuse here is that Riker is injured by a strange life form, and the poison from that injury presents a mortal threat. Pulaski is stumped, Picard and Troi are concerned, and Riker makes jokes and tries to hide his own worry right up until he falls into a coma. Then the parade of flashbacks begin. There's a rudimentary attempt at justification: all the clips feature Riker (of course), and as the "story" progresses, Pulaski learns that Riker's emotional state is crucial to stopping the spread of the infection that's killing him. So she and Troi talk about negative memories, and Pulaski uses her fabulous medical science skills to dredge up some of Riker's worst moments of the past two seasons. I'll give them points for bothering here--they could've just put everyone in Ten-Forward and had them reminisce for an hour. At least there's an illusion of suspense, right?

Not really. The script is god-awful, and the low-budget nature of the episode means we barely see anyone outside of flashbacks: there's Picard, Geordi, Data, Pulaski, Troi, and Riker, and an extra or two. Everything is too artificial, which makes sense, considering that the whole premise behind the episode is forced. At least a "let's swap stories about things we all remember" plot would've been more up front about the contrivance. I'll give everyone the benefit of the doubt that they were trying to create some kind of acceptable storyline to tie together all the reheated footage. It just doesn't work, and what's worse, the reveal is delayed for so long ("Wait, why doesn't Riker have a beard in this scene? Son of a-"), it's actually more frustrating than if it'd been handled directly. Crappy as the first act of "Shades" is, at least it's a legitimate episode. Then the memories roll out, and that goes away.

So, in honor of this episode, here are some excerpts from my earlier reviews, arranged in order of the clips we see on the show:

"This combines a couple things we saw on the original series (and I promise I'll stop bringing that up, eventually), the mysterious other alien race, and the mysterious technological doohickey left behind by a long extinct, incredibly powerful civilization. It has some strong elements, as the mystery surrounding the *Enterprise*'s apparent capture and build-to-reveal on the Ferengis make for good hooks. But the final wrap-up is disappointing, relying on easy moralizing and, to quote Bill Hicks, "back-slapping, 'Ain't humanity great' bullshit." The episode has a semi-god-like being, and it resorts to the sort of expediency that makes those creatures such lazy devices. Plus, the Ferengi suck." -"The Last Outpost"

"Data is overly smug, and Brent Spiner occasionally smiles (which doesn't work at all), but the character is striking, and leaves more of an impression than, say, Riker's genial blandness." -"Encounter At Farpoint"

"Sure, I'll admit it: I found Wesley's stabs at wooing mildly charming. His awkwardness in engineering didn't work (Wheaton is not what I'd call a gifted physical comedian), but I got a kick out his attempts to glean advice from his co-workers. Worf's description of Klingon mating rituals is hilarious ("He reads love poetry. He ducks a lot."), and watching Riker hit on Guinan is actually fairly funny." -"The Dauphin"

"Maybe I've been too spoiled by a run of decent to good episodes, but "The Icarus Factor" really killed my good buzz from "Time Squared." It's pedantic, treacly, and uninspired, and despite the occasional bright spot, plays way too much like a generic TV drama, full of hand-holding music cues and predictable psychology. Which is a shame, because the *idea* behind "Icarus" actually isn't half-bad." -"The Icarus Factor"

""Justice" looks to correct this oversight with a massive dosage of morons in lingerie, and the effect is more campy and awkward than erotic. The *Enterprise* is studying a new class M planet, and the away team has discovered the natives are half naked, generically attractive, and extremely willing to make a stranger feel welcome. The doctor says the crew could use a shore leave, and where better to take one than the land of Pizza Delivery Boys, Copier Fixers, Suggestible Coeds, and Hitchhikers With Neither Grass Nor Gas." -"Justice"

"Surprise surprise, the Bynars are up to something, which doesn't become evident until Riker makes a trip to the holodeck and meets a lovely computer simulation named Minuet. Minuet easily wins Riker over (my favorite part of this is how Number One acts like it's true love, when she's just a program designed to feed him exactly what he wants to eat), keeping him on the 'deck until Picard comes to see what's going on." -"11001001"

At this point, Riker moves from random memories to sexy thoughts. The arrangement of clips at least makes sense in the tenuous logic of the story itself. The problem is, because the clips are chosen for emotional content and not coherency, most of them aren't really scenes, just moments. The only real enjoyment in watching is trying to identify where the clips came from, and that's pretty fleeting.

"The point, anyway, is that matriarchies in fiction are often built around powerful women who would perfectly happy hanging out at home if they ever met a *real* man. "Angel One" doesn't do a damn thing to buck this trend, despite its pretensions towards depth. Beata, the elected leader of the only society we ever meet, is forceful, direct, and calm. She's also immediately turned on by Riker's masculine charms, and while she doesn't go quite so far as to abdicate power, she does sleep with him, and pay more attention to his big speech at the end of the episode than she otherwise might've." -"Angel One"

"Everything is terribly convenient. Riker bangs an attractive woman, we get a lot of horrid comic relief, and we learn Riker really hates clones." -"Up The Long Ladder"

"Yar's death isn't nearly as bizarre. I can't imagine how it played at the time. We know now that no other major cast member will die during the show's run, which means this isn't a daring raising of stakes or a way to show that everyone's in danger. It's more about junking an actress, and while I'll give them credit for trying to create a memorable murderer, well, that credit only goes so far. Yar's death manages to be both too sudden and too drawn out, and it's still the only interesting aspect of a disappointingly crummy hour." -"Skin Of Evil"

"What it translates to is: an alien hitches a ride without permission, rapes a woman, knocks her up, saddles her with grotesque body changes, attaches itself to her post-birth to gain information, endangers everyone on board the ship with its thoughtless selfishness, and then orchestrates an exit in the most emotionally manipulative fashion possible by forcing its "mother" to witness the death of her child. That's not how it's presented, of course. It's presented as a joyous life experience, but no amount of tears and lies make this anything less than a travesty." -"The Child"

It's at this point that we learn the the organisms in Riker are suppressed by the endorphins created by negative emotions. This gives us an excuse to start hitting up the violent or unsettling beats, like a fight scene from "Matter of Honor," or Riker getting the crap beaten out of him in "Conspiracy," or Riker getting sucked into the black tar alien in "Skin of Evil," and so on. The treatment works (and points where they're due, the final montage of rapid fire clips is effectively thrilling), Riker is saved, and, well, really, is this any way to end a season? Finales mean more now

than they used to, but that's still no excuse for leaving such a bad taste in my mouth. I don't even feel like I can even grade this like I would a regular episode, but if I did, I'd have to say,

Grade: F

That's it for the second season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. We're still experiencing some turbulence, but in overall quality, we're getting closer to the sweet spot. There are episodes here I'd be willing to show anyone without a long string of caveats beforehand, and the characters who started developing in the first season have, by and large, progressed nicely. Wesley is tolerable (and, thankfully, minimized), the universe of the show is cohering, and even the worst spots by and large feel like they *belong* here somehow, like the writers have an idea of what they should strive to achieve, but can't always great reach it. The first season was often clumsy and spastic, and the clumsiest elements were so clearly ill-considered and out of place that they hurt the series as a whole. I don't think that's the case anymore, and that has me excited for where we go next. I've heard season 3 is a great one. Fingers crossed.

Before we get there, though, here's a run-down of the best and worst from season 2:

Most bad-ass moment: Captain Picard murders his future self, "Time Squared"

We already knew Picard was capable of deliberation, study, compassion, and wit, but it wasn't till "Time Squared" that we realized how ruthless he could be when the situation demanded. A rift in time sends a future version of Jean-Luc back to "our" *Enterprise*. The poor guy is nearly comatose when he arrives, but the logs on his shuttlecraft promise a horrible end for our heroes unless they can figure out just where they went wrong two hours from now. (Time travel is hell on grammar.) Once "our" Picard realizes his duplicate's mistake, he decides that the only way to save his ship is by ending the cycle--and that means shooting his future self. It's shocking, and logical, and what really makes it work is Patrick Stewart's unflinching determination. Others might call it suicide. For this captain, it's simply getting the job done. **Runners up: Klingon courtship in "The Emissary," Riker killing his clone in "Up The Long Ladder," pretty much any Riker scene in "Matter Of Honor"**

Most Improved Character: Worf

I always wanted to like Worf, and he had one of season one's stronger episodes ("Heart of Glory"). Still, it's only in the second season that Michael Dorn has had a chance to be both a physical threat *and* a deft comedian. Worf only has one focus-episode in S2, "The Emissary," but it's again one of the best of the season, and he is much more of a central player throughout, ably demonstrating his abilities as a tactician in "Peak Performance," serving as an entry point to Klingon culture in "Matter of Honor," and being one of the few voices of sanity in "Samaritan Snare." He gets what's easily the best scene in "The Icarus Factor," and that scene is key to understanding why his character has grown so much--in addition to Dorn's natural gifts, the show's willingness to treat Klingon culture, and Worf's struggles to fit into it, with respect means that whenever Worf is the butt of a joke, we're always laughing with him. **Runners up: Dr. Katherine Pulaski, Wesley Crusher**

Most Problematic: Deanna Troi

Quick: name a storyline featuring Troi that didn't suck. It's okay, I'll wait. She got saddled with one of the season's worst episodes, "The Child," and the series treats her as an exposition shortcut and emotional cipher. Do you need to convey tension on the *Enterprise*? "I sense the crew is upset." Need to imply that some strange aliens might be up to something? "I sense they're hiding something." Need to give Riker an emotional moment? Troi is always available for hugs and indeterminate longing. "Loud As A Whisper" tries to give her some autonomy, introducing a temporary love interest and allowing Troi to influence the action in a way that doesn't just rely on her stating the obvious, but it's not enough. On a show with a dearth of strong female characters, in a genre where women are too often simply objects to be carted between scenes, *TNG* could be doing so much more. And don't even get me started on her mother.

Weirdest Concept: Riva, the Mute Hostage Negotiator

I still can't decide if the focus of "Loud As A Whisper" is a great example of science fiction exploring new ideas, or just a completely ridiculous misstep. It's probably both. "Whisper" isn't a great episode, but it's notable for trying to give us a new idea: Riva, who relies on other people to do his speaking for him. The show's willingness to stretch itself is one of the things that makes the second season better than the first, and while Riva is too touchy-feely for

my tastes, I can't help but think that if *TNG* wasn't willing to risk looking silly, we never would've gotten... **Runners Up: Salia and Anya from "The Dauphin," the never-ending hotel in "The Royale"**

Best New Alien Race: The Borg

No real contest here. They're scary, threatening, mysterious, and unique. They have potential for symbolism (their relentless quest for assimilation is a little like Manifest Destiny from a toaster), but unlike so many of the aliens on *Trek*, that potential doesn't override them as actual characters. Which is funny, really, since the Borg don't have "characters." They are the sci-fi version of The Nothing, a force of destruction and implacability that offers no purchase for Picard's notions of empathy and compassion. They are raised stakes personified, and there isn't a false note in their debut. **Runners up: The Antedans, the Pakleds**

Worst Alien Race: Tinkerbell the Rapist from "The Child"

The Tasha Yar Memorial Award (ie, the Character I'd Most Like To See Eaten By An Oil Monster):

Lwaxana Troi

The Worst Guest Star In The History Of Everything: Joe Piscopo as The Comic in "The Outrageous Okona"

The Scene That May Have Inspired *American Gladiators*: Riker and his dad play an Oedipal tension-filled round of "anbo-jytsu" in "The Icarus Factor"

The Best Reason To Get Rid Of The Holodeck Once And For All: Moriarty achieves Sentience in "Elementary, My Dear Data"

The Best Excuse To Keep The Holodeck A Little Longer: Worf goes to "level two" and gets laid in "The Emissary"

Worst Episode (excluding "Shades Of Gray"): "The Child"

It's tedious, simple-minded, and it ends with a shrug. Even worse, it treats the poor, mishandled Troi with a baffling lack of respect, manipulating her emotionally without taking into account what the consequences of those manipulations might be. An alien forcibly impregnates the *Enterprise's* counselor, using her as a vessel to get a brief taste of human life before voluntarily offering itself before Troi's horrified eyes. The blandly awestruck tone inspires neither awe or reverence, introducing a potentially offensive plotline without any acknowledgement of its emotional complexity or sketchiness. If the second season ended with a cough, it started by going the wrong way up a one way street. It's hard to imagine a clunkier, less promising premiere. **Runners up: "The Schzoid Man," "Up The Long Ladder"**

Best Episode: "Q Who?"

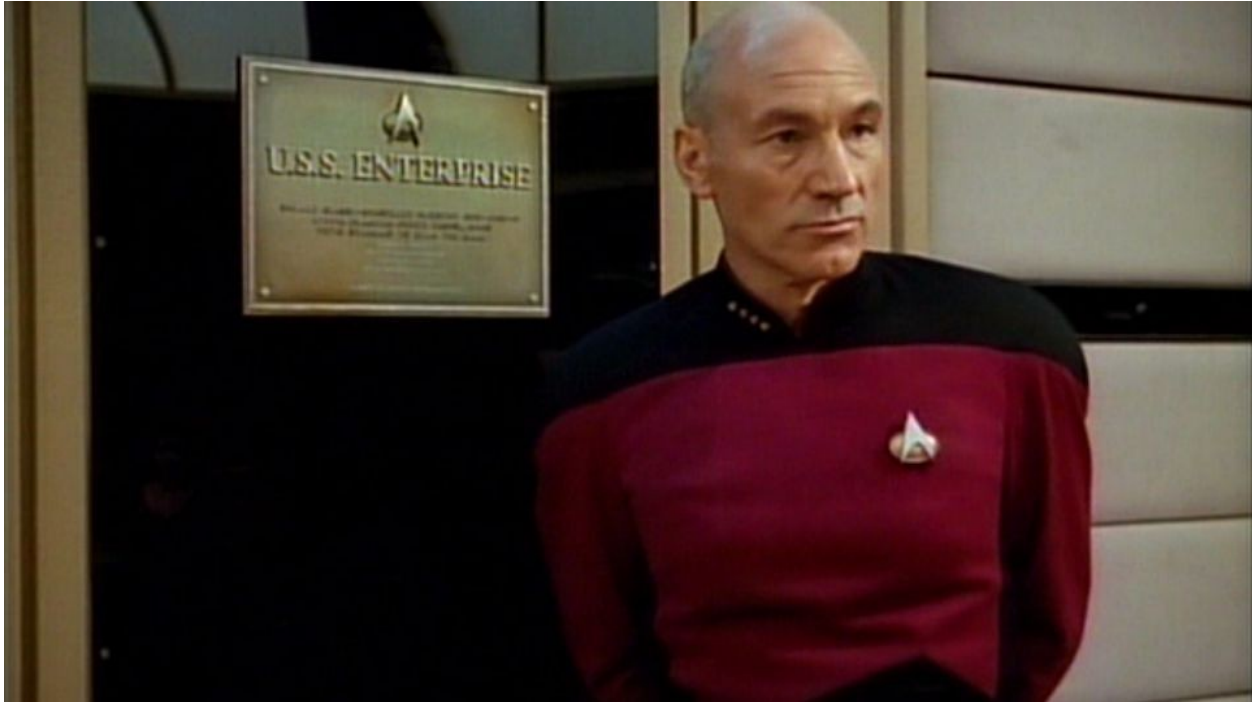
Solid from beginning to end, and, for once, living up to the series' tag line by boldly going where no *Trek* had gone before. Q arrives on the *Enterprise* to once again mock Picard for his arrogance, but instead of playful games, this is strictly Old Testament style god-like being behavior, with consequences and death and horror, and the only salvation lies in humility. Previous episodes had strong scenes, or well-done plot-lines, or great character beats. "Who?" manages a near perfect run from opening to end, showing everyone at their best, and offering the tricky lesson that sometimes, being at your best isn't enough to stop the space zombies. **Runners up: "The Measure Of A Man," "Matter Of Honor"**

Season Grade: B

That's it! Tune in next week when we start exploring season three. Should be a blast.

SEASON THREE

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Evolution"/"The Ensigns Of Command"



By [Zack Handlen](#)

Jul 29, 2010 10:00 AM

"Evolution"

I always get nervous when I talk about a show's big themes. It's something I really should do more often. My favorite television critics are the ones who can take a full season of a show and discuss it as unit, making confident statements like, "The third season of *Breaking Bad* is far and away the show's best," or "This last season of *30 Rock* had some serious problems," and teasing out how individual episodes work together in service of a larger picture. Obviously *30 Rock* doesn't have the lofty goals of a serialized drama, but it's inevitable that a group of twenty-plus episodes, written and filmed as a rough unit, are going to have some kind of connective tissue, especially if there are stabs at continuity and a common writing staff. Part of my job as a TV reviewer is to try and tease out that tissue, even when it's not obvious. *Especially* when it's not obvious. And it always makes me nervous, because, y'know, I'm just this guy. How do I know anything?

Still, a pattern is emerging in *The Next Generation*, and it's worth talking about as we move into the third season. *TOS* was a space Western, focused on exploration, and the danger and excitement of living life on the edge of civilization. *TNG* is about the next step: what happens when civilization has moved in and the paperwork begins. Which sounds boring, and let's face it, sometimes *TNG* is boring. Sometimes it feels like every exciting new discovery gets buried under hours of discussion and deliberation and debate. Yet that careful consideration arguably creates greater opportunity for drama. The best TV shows of the last few decades have been shows that have embraced the drudgery of second guessing, of realizing that no action can exist without consequences, and one of the elements of the show that excites me the most as we move forward is its willingness to deal with the aftermath. It doesn't always work, but when it does, the impact is incredibly powerful. (And really, aren't the best episodes of *TOS* the ones that embrace the idea that heroes don't live in a vacuum? "The City On The Edge of Forever" wouldn't work if Kirk and the others had found a way to save Edith Keeler; "Amok Time" wouldn't resonate if it didn't contrast Spock's stoicism against his temporary fury.)

"Evolution" isn't a great episode, but as a premiere, it is so much better than "The Child" that I'm in danger of overrating it. Beverly Crusher is back! That means we get more face-time with Wesley, but it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make. The plot is a riff on the standard "alien force messes with the *Enterprise* systems," and it all comes down to Wesley not putting his toys away properly, which is the sort of storyline that would've worked a lot better if he was 10. (No, wait, I take that back, precocious kids are far more irritating than immature teens.) Plus, the ending resolution solves everyone's problems without any cost. I don't need every episode to be a tragedy, but in order for an upbeat ending to work, there needs to be more of a sense that it *won't* work, and that never really happens here.

It's never embarrassing, though, and there are enough good ideas thrown out that it's never boring, even if it fails to hit the high notes. It might just be my lingering affection from *Scrubs*, but I dig Ken Jenkins as the prickly Dr. Paul Stubbs. He hits the line between off-puttingly arrogant and vulnerable, and Picard always gets more interesting when he's forced to deal with someone who doesn't immediately bow to his orders. (Glad as I am to have Beverly back, there was a potential in the Pulaski and Picard relationship that was never really fulfilled. I'm not sure it could've been with the show as it was, but the current crew of the *Enterprise* can be a little too friendly.) The series

has dealt with the problem of determining what constitutes life before, but there's something to be said for its commitment to its principles. Once Dr. Crusher raises the possibility that the force that threatens the ship could actually be more than just a technical glitch, the discussion over what to do changes without hesitation.

Basic plot: There's some science stuff going down (I appreciate the show's attempts to bring more hard science into the franchise, and I think it works, but I sort of zone out during those bits--I like knowing they're there, but I don't understand them well enough to summarize), and Dr. Paul Stubbs is on the *Enterprise* to complete an experiment he's spent a good portion of his life working towards. Wesley, being a dork, inadvertently lets some nanites loose on the computer systems of the ship, and those nanites breed, and gain sentience, and cause all kinds of havoc, inadvertently endangering Stubbs work and the rest of the crew. Stubbs and Wesley exchange some words about the dangers of being a child prodigy, Troi tries to break through Stubbs' arrogant shell, and Data lets the nanites use him as a puppet. Oh, and Beverly is worried that her son is too stressed. Happy endings all around, though.

There's conflict in the episode, and some minor suspense about whether or not the main problem will be resolved in time for Stubbs to complete his work, and yet... Well, it's very pleasant. I really don't have a problem with pleasant, and there are lots of times the show can use pleasant to its advantage; it makes the characters more immediately appealing, it helps carry us over the weaker writing beats, and it means we definitely pay attention when we get a legitimately serious threat. There are also times, though, when I wouldn't mind a little more edge. "Evolution" is a good example of an episode that starts to tighten the screws, and then leaves off a few turns too soon. Stubbs is pushy and single-minded, and a decent character--his obsession with using old baseball statistics to recreate plays could've been overly quirky, but Jenkins sells it well enough. His decision to take care of the nanites himself (or a portion of them, anyway) has potential, but it doesn't go anywhere. When Data lets himself be infected by the tiny robots, it's a little creepy, but that creepiness is half-realized. The nanites aren't particularly interesting, and the danger they represent never distinguishes itself.

As for Wesley, I like the idea of what they're doing here--I can't imagine him ever getting the full Quiz Kid Donnie Smith treatment, but I appreciate the awareness that being the smartest guy in the room has its downside. Yet, again, there's no follow-through. Wesley freaks out when he realizes that it's his fault that the ship is in danger (I do like

that we start with him sleeping, presumably moments after his science project made its escape), he has a eye-rolling on the nose conversation with Guinan, and he gets in a minor spat with his mom. There are no sanctions, and no one yells at him for his mistake. Even Beverly's concerns are pointless. She talks to Picard about being worried that Wesley isn't behaving like a proper 17 year old (when I was that age, I had no girlfriends, and I read a lot, and look how I turned out)(er, check that), but it turns out he's fine. He even has a girlfriend.

"Evolution" is very passable. It isn't great. While none of its plots are terrible (only the Beverly story comes close, as her conversation with the captain is kind of ridiculous), there's no risk. The characters are all where they need to be, my favorite doctor is back, and the show feels like it's ready to take that next step. It knows the way. It just needs a little push.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- Seriously, this is *so* much better than "The Child." I'd also put it higher than "Encounter At Farpoint," season premiere-wise. ("Farpoint" has great moments, but is too clumsy to be consistent.) Whatever the episode's problems, it's comforting to know the show is strong enough now that it can pull through a weak-ish script without embarrassing itself.
- The look is different, too. The effects are better (which I'm assuming is due to more money being spent on the first episode of the season), and the whole thing is shot on film.
- The Troi/Stubbs interactions never get into second gear, but it's good to have someone calling her on her invasiveness. "My dear counselor, no insult intended, but please turn off your beam into my soul."
- An actually, legitimately good Wesley moment: "I always get an 'A.'"
- Actually, the worst beat in the Beverly scenes is the comedy music cue at the very end.

"The Ensigns Of Command"

How many problems in this world come down to land? It can be a difficult concern to relate for those of us who don't identify strongly with our homes (I mean, I like Maine, I really do, but if somebody was throwing grenades at me to convince me to leave, I wouldn't be all that torn up about doing so), but that doesn't make it any less powerful or real. Identity is hard work, and one of the ways people figure out who they are is knowing where they came from. The threat of losing that, of being uprooted and thrown into an unfamiliar environment, one that doesn't have the same connections or memories... well, that can have a powerful effect on people. The threat of losing home can change normally peaceful men and women into, well, whatever they need to be to protect their piece of the world.

It's that desperation that drives the story in "Ensigns," and while I don't think the emotion is as well-developed as it could be, it's clear enough to create the sort of conflict that "Evolution" lacked. I really liked this episode, and while it's come down slightly in my estimation since I watched it, I still think it's got a lot to recommend it. The stakes are higher, the resolution forces characters to make strong choices, and the episode makes some smart observations about Data that aren't compromised or softened. There are weak spots--the colonists aren't as developed as they should've been, and their leader, Gosheven, is sort of a lump. (An aggressive lump, but still a lump.) Plus, the Sheliaks look like they belong in a *Dr. Who* serial from the '70s, although that's not really a bad thing in my book. Anyway, weak spots and all, this was exciting and clever, and I especially appreciated how the best parts were the ones you had to think about a little to really grasp the implications. "Ensigns" connects most of the dots for you, but not all of them, and that's important.

Let's put the issue of property aside, and take a look at Data. I don't think the question of his nature has been this prominent in an episode since "Measure Of A Man," and where "Measure" was primarily about proving what we all knew, "Ensigns" goes a step deeper, and questions whether or not Data's quest for self-actualization can ever be achieved. We tend to assume certain things about the character because humans tend to ascribe emotional content to actions, even when there's no proof of it. When Data should be happy or sad or excited or proud, it's nearly impossible to accept that he isn't those things, even when we're repeatedly told that the android is incapable of feeling the way we understand it. Partly that's because Data is played by a human actor, and he's written by humans,

and given the natures of on-going television drama, there's going to be some occasional seepage. Really, though, we see what want to see. Data is polite, helpful, and calm, so it's easy to assume that must mean something more than programming.

But does it? "Ensigns" doesn't spend all its time on the issue, but it opens with Data preparing to perform in a concert, and the relationship he develops with one of the colonists on Tau Cygna V makes it more than just a matter of curiosity. That Data wants to be more human makes sense, because it's inherent in his design. I can't remember if he's brought this up himself, but the fact that he was built to *look* like a man, and given the basic tools required to interact with other men (and, hubba hubba, women), at least implies that his purpose is to be as human as possible. How exactly he goes about that is by getting better and better pretending to be a real live boy, with the hope that eventually there will be a transition between pretending and simply being. I never really liked the emotion chip he gets in *Generations*. (Which is otherwise an absolutely perfect movie that I have no problems whatsoever withahahahaha, who the hell am I kidding, it stinks) It's a shortcut to the solution that actually makes him more robotic than before. Here, at least, when he doesn't feel anything in the face of Ard'rian's affections, it's honest.

I'm making it sound like the episode is dryer than it actually is, but one of the reasons I liked this one so much is that it manages to balance all this heaviness with a gripping, well-paced story arc. The core conflict is very clear: an immovable object (15,000 colonists who've made their home on Cygna through years of sacrifice and struggle) meets an irresistible force (the Sheliak, to whom the planet technically belongs). The Sheliak want to colonize Cygna immediately, and threaten to wipe out anyone who gets in their way, while the colonists, led by uber-dick Gosheven, want to stay and defend their home. Against an alien race with vastly superior technology. Maybe it's an arrogance born out of decades of struggle, but the colonists aren't really making smart choices.

The ep is split between the sides of this struggle: on the one hand, there's Data trying to convince everyone to run for their freaking lives, and on the other, there's Picard, negotiating with the Sheliak to buy enough time for the evacuation. (The atmosphere of the planet prevents easy transport.) Both sides are great fun to watch. Like I said, Picard does well when faced with a strong adversary, and he's besieged on multiple fronts here. The Sheliak are inflexible and contemptuous, and Starfleet isn't much help in the deliberations; when Picard asks for assistance, they

tell they can get him the extra ship he needs... in about three weeks. Even the normally reliable Geordi is unable to solve the transporter problem in time. Picard is only able to get the time by relying on the Sheliak's obsessive attention to detail, putting them in a corner and forcing them to accept his demands.

The emotional core of "Ensigns" comes from Data's struggles on Cygna. As with everything, his approach is logical, and the solution he eventually settles on is striking while still being consistent with everything we know about the character. I do think the deck had to be a little stacked to force him to the point of violence. While we don't see every conversation Data has with the colonists trying to convince them of the dangers of the Sheliak threat, what we do see is more vague than it needed to be, and if he'd done a better job of explaining the nature of the danger, the episode probably would've ended a lot sooner. (It seems like he doesn't actually say, "They have really, really good weapons" until the very end.) I like his progression, though, from direct honesty, to reverse psychology, to shock value, and I like how his decision to shoot some of the locals (with the phaser on stun, of course) is both perfectly sensible and surprising. It's not like Data is in danger of becoming an anti-hero, but he takes a risk here that a human character might not have taken, and it's an excellent reminder of Data's potential to make the right choices the rest of us might not be capable of. (I worked very hard not to have that sentence end in preposition, but it was not to be.)

Another reminder of Data's oddness comes in his relationship with Ardy, a geeky tomboy who's first fascinated, then emotionally drawn to the android. This is the first time we've seen Data dealing with romance since (shudder) "The Naked Now," and it could've been disastrous; it's easy to imagine the writers trying to soften the character or wink at the audience. (I didn't really get into it at the time, but one of the disappointing elements of "Pen Pals" is that it relies on Data having an emotional connection with someone, and it reduces him. He's more interesting if he's pretending to have feelings, not losing his judgment to them.) I wouldn't call their final scene together stark, exactly, but it does show there are certain limits to Data's development, even while his conversation with Picard at the end of the episode argues otherwise. Ardy kisses Data, and he analyzes the action, and then tries to respond in kind--not because he shares the emotional connection, but because he's designed to mimic appropriate behavior. Ardy realizes this, and while you could argue that she's a little naive to think she might've won the android over, her self-

awareness mitigates this. She knows she's being foolish, but she tries anyway, and Data comes as close as he can to reciprocation.

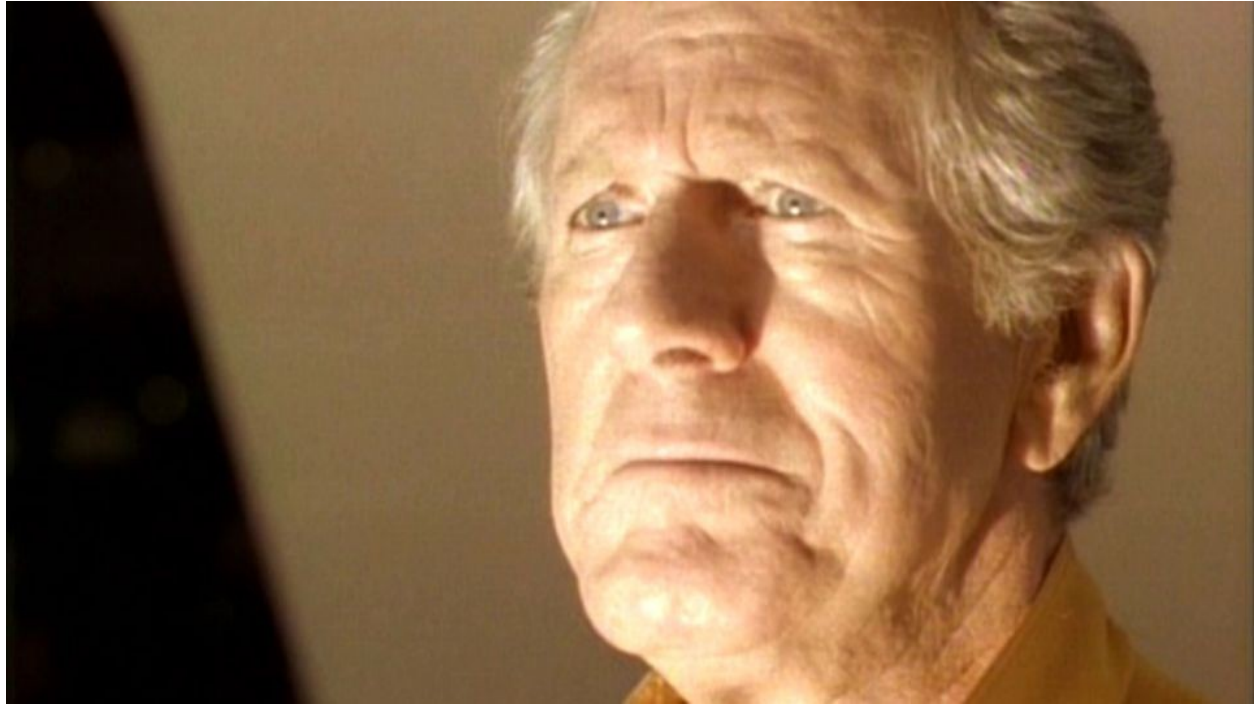
It's a nice scene that only gets better in retrospect, because it's the sort of touch this show needs to jump from good to great. It goes back to the idea of consequences I mentioned earlier. *TNG* has tried to achieve the same levels of pulpy fun that were *TOS*'s stock in trade, and never quite managed it. Our new leads are more thoughtful, more deliberate, and that means it's harder to buy them as two-fisted, hormone-crazy action stars. (Obviously *TOS* was capable of thoughtfulness, but it's a much rawer show than *TNG* is.) That's something the series needs to embrace, and both "Evolution" and "Ensigns" are good examples of the returns the writers can get when they know what kind of show they're working on. "Ensigns" is the better of the two, because the compromises it reaches to arrive at a semi-happy ending are organic and satisfying. Bring on the rest of the season, please.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Nearly gave this one an A-, and I'm still on the fence. If I'd seen this late S1 or early S2, I definitely would've graded higher, and I'm not entirely convinced I still shouldn't.
- So are Beverly and Picard dating now?
- "Here we stand." "Then here you die."
- How awesome is Picard's stalling?
- "But nothing more?" "I do not understand."
- I didn't really get into Picard's pep talk to Data at the end, but it's a nice way to temper the bleakness of the Ardy goodbye scene without denying it's truth.
- Next week, we get into "The Survivors" and "Who Watches The Watchers."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Survivors"/"Who Watches The Watchers"](#)



By [Zack Handlen@zhandlen](mailto:Zack.Handlen@zhandlen)

Aug 5, 2010 10:00 AM

"The Survivors"

We've been talking over in the *X-Files* recaps about how great *X-Files* was as an anthology show once it got a good head of steam going. The show's core concept--two FBI agents investigating strange cases that fell through the bureaucratic cracks--made it possible for episodes to vary wildly in style and intent, from the overtly horrific to the cynically comedic, while still maintaining a consistent world. There were mythology episodes that worked with continuity, but there were also one-offs like "Clyde Bruckman's Final Repose" or "Home" that played like short stories that our heroes just happened to brush up against. While *X-Files* could be hit or miss (especially in its later seasons), that freedom to explore the edges resulted in some absolutely stellar television, and it's something that genre shows do better than just about any other kind of TV.

TNG doesn't really work the same way. The cast is too large, and the tone is too consistent, for it ever achieve the same level of diversity. I don't think that's a problem with the series in any way, as a lot of my favorite shows are very consistent, and I'm not sure *TNG* could've sustained the same amount of self-parody without losing its soul. I mention *The X-Files* here partly because I just want to pimp out those recaps (Todd VanDerWerff and I are nearing the end of the third season, why not join us?), and partly because "The Survivors" is proof that, when it wanted to, *TNG* was quite capable of producing its own short-story style narrative. The crew of the *Enterprise* needs to be more directly involved with the action than Mulder and Scully ever did, but when the end results are as excellent as they are here, it's a great reminder of *TNG*'s potential for exploration, and how it's possible to tell a self-contained plot that still feels connected with the rest of the show.

A few commenters complained about the lack of summary in these recaps, and I don't mind giving a little more info than I have been. (Although you should check out my recaps of *TOS*, which often devolved into plot-summaries-with-occasional-jokes.) To that end: The *Enterprise* responds to a distress call from a Federation colony on Rana IV. When they arrive, they find the colony wiped out and the planet nearly devoid of life (intelligent or otherwise), except for one small area of land that appears untouched by catastrophe. An away team beams down to find two life forms, a married couple, Kevin and Rishon, who seemingly have no idea that the rest of the colonists are dead. Both are pleasant and accommodating, but refuse to leave the planet, despite Riker's urging. Then the evil alien ship comes back, only it's kind of wussy, and Troi starts freaking out because of a music box tune. Something strange is going on here.

There's a lot that's great about this episode, and we'll hopefully get to all of it, but what I noticed most while re-watching it for this recap ("Survivors" is one of the *TNG*s I remember most strongly even though I haven't seen it in years, enough so that I was able to figure out which episode it was after the teaser--which isn't really that impressive, but it may be the first time that's happened since I started doing these write ups) is how wonderfully, elegantly logical it progresses from one point to the next. The central mystery doesn't really require the presence of the *Enterprise* to exist; Picard serves as a kind of audience surrogate here, asking the questions we want answered, albeit with a little more emotion behind them than we might have.

What's cool is that we get to see him figure things out, and in a way that doesn't make him seem slow for the sake of padding. It's clear that something is going on, and it's not hard to figure out there must be a connection between the couple on the planet, and the alien ship that keeps trying to scare the *Enterprise* out of orbit. Once Picard realizes this connection, he tests it, first reasoning out the opposing ship's intentions, and then proving just how direct that ship's relationship with Kevin and Rishon must be by providing the couple with the one condition that would cause the *Enterprise* to leave the planet for good, just to see if they'd attempt to fulfill it. (Gah, clumsy sentence--basically, Picard says, "'We'll never leave, unless you two have been killed by, oh I don't know, that crazy creepy ship that keeps showing up,'" and bam presto, ten minutes later, the evil ship seems to do just that.)

It's pretty clear something is up from the beginning. There's that weird unscathed patch of land, and then there's the fact that, when the alien ship first makes an appearance, it attacks the *Enterprise* with embarrassingly low power levels. Anybody who's watched their fair share of sci-fi could probably start connecting the dots, especially with the franchise's frequent use of the god-like being, but by following each step in Picard's deductions, the delay between our understanding of the situation and our heroes' understanding is minimized. There's none of that tedious wandering around repeating the obvious that can make stories like this so boring. (The time to fill is usually a big factor. Stripped to its core, you could probably get the important pieces of "Survivors" done in about twenty-five minutes, or the length of a half-hour *Twilight Zone*.) The reveal is important, but the episode doesn't depend entirely on the reveal for its dramatic effect.

Part of the drama comes from Picard's work; Patrick Stewart's indignation at being even temporarily fooled gives him an emotional investment. Obviously he can't simply leave, given Troi's condition, but you get the sense that even if Troi wasn't suffering, Picard would've kept poking around. One of the difficulties in trying to pull off this kind of anthology-style approach is coming up with convincing reasons to involve the *Enterprise* with the action. Here, we have Troi, whose agonies give us another emotional undercurrent (and while I don't think making her a victim every week would really improve the character, it is nice to see her abilities used in a way that isn't simply her commenting on obvious subtext), and the need to figure out just what killed everyone else on the planet, which are both good enough reasons. I like that the more character-oriented motivation from Picard is there, too.

Of course, the real core of "Survivors" is the deep dark secret behind just what the hell is going on with Kevin and Rishon. Both the guest actors are solid, and both are faces that should be familiar to TV fans. I don't really associate

Anne Haney, who passed away in 2001, with any one role, though I've seen her in a bunch of stuff, but despite his long and distinguished career, John Anderson (who died in 1992) will always be MacGyver's grandfather to me. Haney gives you a clear sense of Rishon in a handful of scenes, nothing remarkable but a very warm and likable presence, and Anderson, who gets the episode's big reveal monologue, does some heavy lifting with a nicely underplayed weariness. I like the general thread of irritation that runs throughout his performance, too, because it's the frustration of someone who knows they're about to be caught, and knows they deserve to be caught, but can't bear to let go of the moment.

All right, so let's get into the big secret: Kevin, contrary to appearances, isn't human. He's actually a Douwd, an immortal being with the ability to create illusions and trickery and all kinds of wonderful god-like being magic. Rishon, at least the Rishon we see, is a phantom, created by Kevin to replace the real Rishon, who died in the attack on Rana IV just like the rest of the non-Douwd colonists. Already, this is heartbreaking. The issue I've always taken with the GLB plotlines is that GLBs are so powerful and ill-defined that there's no reason to invest in them as characters. They're either a justification for an otherwise inexplicable storyline, or else they're obstacles to be defeated. There's no real grounded personality, so it's hard to get that emotional about what they do. Crazy stuff happens, then after a certain point it stops happening, and we all move on our lives.

Kevin is different, because his connection to Rishon, who was human, and therefore mortal and vulnerable, shows the limits of his power. He can't bring her back from the dead, not really (she's there enough to register on life scans, but the soul is gone), and when she decided to go fight alongside of the rest of the colonists when the planet was attacked, he was unable to stop her, because he loved her. His own moral code prevented him from fighting the enemy--he tried his tricks to fool them, but as we've seen, those tricks aren't impossible to see through. So eventually, the alien threat, a group of Husnocks, figured out his ruse and struck back. Hard.

So that's terribly sad, and it's a terrific image--a powerful being haunting a planet with the memory of his lost love and the home they shared together. What makes "Survivors" really great, though, is that it approaches Kevin's character with the same careful deliberation that it applies to Picard's deductive efforts. Kevin's pacifism is, apart from his powers, the character's defining trait. It's what makes the tragedy of this story possible, and it determines the nature of our heroes' investigations; if Kevin was more willing to fight to defend his position, he might never have lost Rishon, and even if he had, he would've easily been able to repel Picard and the others from discovering his secret. It's only natural, then, to wonder if he's really justified in his commitment to principle. Shows like this often deal in absolutes, and while that can make for powerful moments, it also tends to fall apart in the aftermath. (Which is another reason why the half-hour format worked so well for *Twilight Zone*; it didn't give you much time to ask questions.)

Here, though, we're given a reason why it's so important Kevin stick to his principles. After the death of Rishon, Kevin was angry. Very, very angry. So he killed the Husnock. Not just the aliens who had attacked his planet, or a portion of them, or everyone over a certain age; he killed every single Husnock, obliterating an entire race with the power of his brain. That's... well, that's messed up. It's maybe a little more over-the-top than the series can really support, but it works for me. I'm not sure Picard's decision to leave Kevin alone with his misery at the end of the episode is the right decision, because the genocide of 50 billion sentient beings for the sake one lost love is impossible to justify. And yet, I can't think of any other option. Like Picard says, there's no way to judge Kevin for his actions, because what he's done is so immense it can barely be conceived of, let alone understood. This is the first great episode of the new season, because it's easy to imagine it standing on its own as a terrific science fiction story, but it also manages to incorporate the *Enterprise* without straining too hard. Plus, it's really sad, and I'm a total sucker for that.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- The rest of the main crew is sidelined here, but Worf does get a great beat with Kevin: "I admire gall." (Also: "Good tea. Nice house.")
- This is shallow, but man, I really prefer Beverly's new haircut.
- It's interesting how you could tie this episode in with the next, in that both deal with the difficulties of maintaining principles, and the problems that can arise when commitment to an absolute ideal is forced to cope with the real world, which is hardly ideal and never absolute. Maybe if Kevin had fought alongside his wife and neighbors, the catastrophe might've been avoided.

"Who Watches The Watchers"

I think I know what's best for everyone, really I do. I'm reasonably intelligent, I've been through my share of crap, and I've learned some lessons. It's so easy to listen to my friends talk about their lives and point out the obvious mistakes they're making. Aren't I obligated, then, to take a hand and try and make their lives better? If I have this wisdom (and oh my god, you guys, it's crazy how smart I am about this stuff, I could be a therapist if it didn't require all those classes and text books and professional ethics), surely it's my job to do everything I can to use that wisdom to help the less fortunate. Couldn't be more clear cut, really. Except, well, okay, sometimes I'm wrong. Sometimes I misread a situation, sometimes I over-simplify, and I do have a tendency to favor stabbing as my go-to. But really, that isn't so bad, because, hey, worse case scenario, if I tell my friend that she should dump her boyfriend because he has a last name ending in "e," and she does, and then she freaks out... Hey, she's not me. I get to walk away, and go spread some love elsewhere.

It's easy to think you know what other people should do to be happy. And I think when we're younger, you can even be right occasionally, but that doesn't last long. Anyway, being right or wrong isn't the point here. I'm not saying that advice is a bad idea, or that you can't help (or be helped by others in turn). I'm more getting at that specific arrogance that sometimes hits us when our lives are going well, and one of our friends isn't doing so great, and suddenly you get this brilliant idea that you can fix them. The reason this hardly ever works is that, well, you can't. You can't make somebody be what you think they should be, and the more you try, the more you struggle to control a situation that isn't directly connected to you, the more difficult it becomes to see the outcome.

All of which is a more roundabout than usual way of saying, The Prime Directive? Yeah, that's a good idea. I mean, a ruined friendship is one thing. At least the relationships I've destroyed didn't have a body count. (That I know of.) We've seen what happens when Federation personnel ignore the rules and try and impose their will on less advanced civilizations, and it's never pretty, even if those personnel are motivated by the best intentions. "Who Watches The Watchers" shows how badly things can go when accidents happen, when a string of bad luck hits good people, and how quickly events can spin out of control. It continues the excellent run of "Survivors" by following a problem from creation to resolution and taking each step with careful consideration, often moving the story in a surprising direction, but never sacrificing character for the sake of plot.

So, we've got ourselves another distress signal, this time coming from Mintaka III--or, more specifically, from a research outpost on Mintaka III. The natives of the planet are a pre-industrial race that look Vulcan and share the Vulcan's love of reason, pointy ears, and bowl haircuts. (The Vulcans were actually super passionate when they first started out, which I initially assumed was something this episode forgot or overlooked. However, given how much in sway of their emotions the Mintakans reveal themselves to be, the characterization makes a lot more sense than I'd given it credit. These are people who are struggling to follow the dictates of logic, while still being vulnerable to their insecurities.) The outpost is full of scientists, hidden behind an electric shell, watching the locals and taking all

kinds of notes. Only now they've been having problem with their machines, and they need the *Enterprise* to come down and fix everything.

It doesn't go so great. The batteries powering the holodeck-style illusion that keeps the scientists hidden fail, and two of the natives, a girl named Oji and her father, Liko (Ray Wise!), see behind the curtain. Worse, Liko is badly injured, and Dr. Crusher makes the call to beam him up to the *Enterprise* Sick Bay for treatment. Oji sees him disappearing, and Liko, in his dazed state, sees Picard giving orders and decides that Picard is a god. Which, you have to agree, is a reasonable assumption to make. Beverly tries to do the standard mind-wipe, but it doesn't take, and when Liko returns to his people, he starts spreading stories about the great Picard, and how He can do anything, maybe even bring back the dead. (Like Liko's wife...) This is bad enough, but during the catastrophe at the outpost, one of the scientists was thrown clear, and is now wandering the countryside, seriously injured and unable to contact the ship.

All right, so arguably, this is a little contrived--but that's sort of the point. Given the existence of the Prime Directive, and the fact that the Federation still makes the effort to send scientists out to do this work regardless of the risk, crises like this one are going to pop up from time to time. I doubt the events of "Watchers" are a complete anomaly, and instead of using the confluence of unfortunate events simply to drive the plot, it works as part of the episode's main theme: the importance of maintaining the right kind of boundaries, and the way life often works to make that separation nearly impossible. So yeah, it's weird that they don't have a working back-up system at the outpost, since it's not like the situation is impossible to foresee, and it's also pretty unlucky that one of the scientists goes missing, and that Beverly's attempts to wipe Liko's mind clean don't really work. (Kind of makes you wonder what happened to the little girl in "Pen Pals.") But all of these things *could* have happened, and that the *Enterprise* would get involved in this particular case just means we get to see the results first-hand.

One element that does serve to mitigate the perfect storm of suckiness here is the Mintakans themselves. I'm not a huge fan of *Trek's* habit of ascribing broad personality traits to alien races (one of the few aspects of "Survivors" that doesn't quite work for me is the attempt to write off the Husnocks as warlike and aggressive, to make them a little more "bad guy"-ish and mitigate Kevin's crime. Although since Kevin is the only one who knows anything about them, I suppose it's not a stretch to think he wasn't completely truthful in his description), but the peaceful, agrarian culture we see here works well enough, and it does a nice job of both minimizing the damage that Federation interference might've caused, it also helps back up the story's point, that even under the best circumstances, everything can fall apart. Ray Wise is great as Liko; Wise plays "open wound" emotional situations well, and watching him go from friendly dad to fervent apostle, he never hits a false note.

This is another swell Picard episode, too. I love his outrage when the head scientist suggests he play God; Stewart takes what could've been a question of philosophy and turns into a conviction, a stand against the irrational and superstitious and backward. And I love his reaction to Beverly bringing Liko to the ship, telling her she should have left him to die. Here's another way that Picard differs from Kirk: if it'd been Picard in "City On The Edge Of Forever," he would've let Edith Keeler die with a minimum of angst, because being a starship captain isn't simply about adventure and phasers and punching. Kirk wasn't immature or anything, but Picard has a sense of responsibility that weighs down all his actions and relationships. With a lesser actor, this could've been boring, but Stewart makes it work, and his attempts to communicate with the leader of the Mintakans are really beautifully played, full of hope and sadness and risk. (We'll see the "check out your planet through this window" trick again in *First Contact*, where it's used to decent, if lesser, effect.)

Again, we spend so much time with the guest characters this episode that the rest of the cast doesn't get a ton to do, but Riker and Troi do end up infiltrating the Mintakans in an attempt to calm everyone down. Their banter is fine,

and, for once, the series finds a good excuse for Troi's presence on the ship. Given her training and abilities, she should be used more often as an ambassador to new cultures, but while you sometimes see hints of that, her emotion-sensing talent is too often as a cheap way to foreshadow betrayal or twists. Here, though, she's an informed, valuable crewmember, and if she ends up as a hostage for most of the second half of the episode, well, that's not really her fault. (Although it would've been cool to see her use her empathy to play off people more, but that's just my personal pipe dream.)

It all ends in a confrontation on the planet, when Picard is finally forced to reveal himself, and gets shot by Liko for his pains. The final scene is definitely the optimistic take on the situation, showing that even when everything goes horribly, it's still possible to find common ground. I think "Watchers" earns this optimism, though. I'm not entirely convinced that the Federation's efforts to study primitive life are worth the potential catastrophe those efforts create, but I'm willing to accept the premise. I'm generally not a fan of farce, because I hate conflict that arises from unnecessary dishonesty, but this is basically farce played for drama, not laughs, and it works very well. I may be grading this and "Survivors" too high, but I think I'm just grateful. For the first time since I started these recaps, I got a week that was just about perfect. I think my standards may be rising already, but if season 3 keeps shooting for this level of quality, I'm not too concerned.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- Next week, we do "The Bonding" and investigate "The Booby Trap."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Bonding"/"Booby Trap"



By [Zack Handlen@zhandlen](mailto:Zack.Handlen@zhandlen)

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"The Bonding"

Or, The One In Which We Learn The Importance Of Moving On, And Wesley Has Something To Say To Captain Picard

So, we were talking about consequences. It doesn't get much more consequential than death. "The Bonding" isn't the first time a character has died on *TNG*, and it's not even the first time a character's death has had a major impact. While the show's attitude regarding its casualties varies to a certain degree depending on the needs of each episode, this has never been a series that was cavalier about mortality. On *TOS*, a certain body count was expected: Kirk might beat himself up about an expired red-shirt, but that was always more a way of driving the narrative than it was about dealing with the idea of death itself. Kirk's frustration raised the stakes and our emotional investment in the storyline. Rarely were the pile of bodies the ship accrued on its five year mission intended as much more than a score card.

On *TNG*, because of the larger cast and more thoughtful tone, there's a clearer sense of the impact each fresh corpse makes on our heroes. Tasha Yar dies twenty minutes into "Skin of Evil," but the episode still makes time to mourn her even after the main threat is defeated. Sure it was clumsy and saccharine, a misguided attempt to establish a connection with a character who never really came into her own, but the intention was there to do something different, and that's important. Season three has *TNG* coming into its own, and that means we get to see earlier concepts that were promising but clumsily handled dealt with again in a more assured, effective fashion. Last week it was revisiting the limits of the God-Like Being (first seen in "Hide And Q") and the Prime Directive (first seen in,

ugh, "Justice"). This week, we're facing the Random Crewmember Death. Instead of just using someone's sacrifice to goad Worf and the rest of the crew to action, "The Bonding" tries to deal with the grieving process as honestly and directly as possible. (Admittedly, "direct" takes on a different meaning when you have energy beings and so forth, but still.)

The *Enterprise* is orbiting one of those planets where the locals all killed themselves in battle, and Worf is leading an away team of archaeologists on the surface when tragedy strikes: an explosion kills a scientist and crewmember, Lt. Marla Aster. (Troi senses the explosion and immediately tells Picard to beam the party back to the ship, in a definite "closing the barn door after the horse is stolen" moment.) Worf is upset, as are Picard and the others, but it's Aster's 12 year-old son Jeremy who's hit the hardest. His mom is dead, and his father died a few years back, so now he's an orphan, alone on the ship, his only relatives thousands of light years away.

There's a sci-fi element to "Bonding," besides the obvious "mom killed by long dead aliens and comfort provided by mind-reading half-human and tall dude with forehead ridges" factor, but it doesn't make itself known for some time. The first act focuses on Troi's work helping everyone deal with the loss, and there's something disarming about the episode's shift from thoughtful adventure to earnest drama. *TNG* has always been willing to give its characters time to breathe, but this isn't just poker games and holodecks. This is weighty, often ponderous discussion, and at times it can play like a Very Special Episode (no relation to Noel Murray) of some family sitcom, pausing in the midst of all the one liners to teach us an important lesson about coping with loss and moving on, and so forth.

Whether the shift works is up for debate. If *TNG* has an Achilles' Heel, it's that its earnestness can go too far. *TOS*'s pulp-driven theatrics occasionally edged over the border into camp, but *TNG* goes in the opposite direction, and it takes an effort of will not to snicker occasionally at just how serious everyone is, behind their goofy uniforms and techno babble. The darker emotions in "Bonding" are dealt with compassionately and with a great deal of tact, but it can feel a little airless. Troi's understanding of the situation is so pitch-perfect, and her ability to chart out of the beats of each character's handling of the grief is so on target, that, until the main plot kicks in, scenes threaten to turn into lectures. Sadness and mourning are like weather patterns; it's possible to predict broad trends, but you only know it's going to rain after the first drops hit. Some messiness here would've been nice. There are moments that flirt with that, but I'm not sure they go far enough.

Yet even with that caveat in mind, this is an often powerful episode. The acting is strong, which goes a long way towards mollifying the potentially cliched dialog; Stewart is as reliable as ever, and it's terrific to see Dorn getting a chance to show more range. I have theory about how the most interesting characters are the ones that question or are baffled by societal norms. Data does that job on *TNG*, and he gets one great scene with Riker, but Worf is also an outsider, and his solution to grief here, proposing that he "bond" with Marla's son in the Klingon ritual R'uustai, is endearingly direct. Troi is the focal point of the episode, and while Marina Sirtis is never going to be the most amazing actress ever, she does fine, balancing compassion and patience with the occasional flash of frustration. Even Wil Wheaton handles his share of the heavy lifting passably well, for the first time showing some real anger in Picard's presence instead of just the usual obsessive hero worship.

As for the actual plot, remember "The Royale"? Turns out aliens who try and make people feel better via fantastic illusions are more wide-spread than we thought. The Koinonians weren't the only race on this planet, they were just the only ones made of a matter. Another race of pure energy beings really didn't like all the destruction and murder and chaos their more physical neighbors caused, so after Marla is inadvertently killed by a remnant of that long finished national tragedy, the energy beings first clear out and defuse the rest of the mines in the area (leaving them for Geordi to find as, presumably, a show of good faith), and then send up an avatar of Marla to take Jeremy down to the planet, where he will be able to live happily ever after in a world that isn't real.

As a storyline, this is middling, yet another in a long line of generic races who exist entirely to place our heroes into moral quandaries. But as a metaphor for the importance of moving on, well, it's not horrible. It lacks a certain finesse, and at times the climax of the episode threatens to turn into a series of lectures on good mental hygiene. Yet the gravity of the situation is impressive. The lesson that death is a natural part of life is one that gets repeated over and over again in stories of all kinds, but it's not impossible to appreciate the respect "Bonding" shows for its characters and their loss. The alien Marla is a device, and while it might've made for a more dramatic story if there'd been more to the creature than that, it serves its purpose well enough.

"Bonding" is the first *TNG* episode written by Ron Moore, who eventually went on to create one of the greatest science fiction shows ever, *Battlestar Galactica*. (I was going to say "the *BSG* remake," but honestly, the new version earned the name on its own terms.) Moore did a lot of work for the Trek franchise, and while the writing here isn't anywhere near as good as he'd eventually become, there are some familiar themes. *BSG* is a show perpetually haunted by death, and "Bonding" shows a writer already interested in the cost of all this cheerful space travel. I said the episode could've stood to be messier, and *BSG* is a great example of just how powerful tricky emotions and shifting sentiment can be when a group of imperfect individuals has to create a new life trapped in a giant tin can. There are a couple of messy moments here, though. Worf's eagerness to bond with Jeremy, and his awkward initial attempts at sharing Klingon culture with the boy, show the jagged, clumsy reality of what happens when two strangers try and communicate through each other's pain. Even more difficult is how Marla's death reminds Wesley and Beverly Crusher of their own loss. The two have a great scene together that, for once, isn't simply two tremendously nice people communicating even-handedly. Wesley's final outburst, in which he expresses some old rage at Picard for his father's death, isn't a bad beat either.

This one was a little too preachy to my tastes, and I wound up respecting it more than enjoying it. I needed a little more sugar to wash the medicine down, or else I need more of that uncomfortable uncertainty that true sadness brings, but it wasn't a bad try for all that. I'm going to give it the edge for its willingness to deal with a potential bummer of a subject head-on, and for the vulnerability we see in our recurring cast. And hell, it ends with a Klingon ritual, which is always fun. Who wouldn't want to be Worf's adopted brother?

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- The score is horrible, though. I noticed it last week as well, but between this episode and the next, hardly a scene went by that it didn't sound like someone shouting emotions at you.
- I didn't mention him, but Gabriel Damon, who plays Jeremy, is fine.
- "Jeremy, on the starship *Enterprise*, no one is alone. No one."
- I'm curious to see what you folks thought of this one. I sometimes have a tendency to over-penalize a show for what I see as cliches.

"Booby Trap"

Or The One With The Empty Ship, Power Draining Reactors, And Cyber Massage

This episode is about a booby trap. A booby. Trap. That's the title of the episode. It's right there in black and white. (Or, as in the case of the opening titles of the show, blue and black.) And in case you forget that title, Picard will remind you, about twenty or thirty times. And in case that isn't enough, Riker takes up some slack. Maybe it's because the ten year-old in my brain thinks "booby" is so inherently hilarious that it can't pass by without comment, or maybe it's that there really isn't another easy name for what the term describes (triggered unpleasant device? An unwelcome gift? Belloq's revenge?), but man, it sure seemed like those two words came up an awful lot in this

episode. It's not as though this is a new concept for the show, either. You think they'd be more used to stepping on the stone that makes all the arrows shoot out.

Of course, "Trap" isn't really about its title, although the offending devices drive the episode more than the fake Marla did in "Bonding." "Trap" is really about Lt. Cmmdr. Geordi La Forge, who despite being a high ranking officer in what is presumably one of the coolest ships in the Fleet, can't make any headway with the ladies. The episode opens with him getting the cold shoulder from a cute girl we'll never see again--and while the situation itself is a familiar one (I think I've been on both sides of the "I like you, but-" conversation multiple times now), that doesn't make it any more fun to watch. Geordi is generally so cheery about everything that it's weird watching him make his move, especially considering how obvious it is he's about to be turned down. Although I have to question Christi, the girl. Unless Geordi seriously undersold the nature of this "program," it couldn't have been that much of a surprise that this was a date. So either she's nice in that stupid way that makes a person mean, or else the sexual harassment regulations in the Federation aren't all that great.

It's not that hard to see what kind of episode "Trap" is supposed to be. We see Geordi get rejected, then we see him commiserating with Guinan. He's your typical nerd: great at the math and the logic, not so great at understanding the mystery that is Woman. (I think my favorite part of that conversation is Guinan explaining why she has a thing for bald guys: "...because a bald man was kind to me once when I was hurting." I hear that her backstory never pays off, which is a shame when we get hints like this.) A crisis arises on the *Enterprise*, Geordi springs into action, and in the course of that crisis, he ends up creating a computer simulation of a woman who shares his interests and passions. The two manage to save the ship and have chemistry together, and while the relationship can't ever be in the "real" world, Geordi ends the ep with a new confidence in himself, and then maybe he goes and buys some space condoms. THE FUTURE IS NOW.

I can see how this would work, and it sort of does, but it's creepy, too, and I strongly doubt that was intentional. I've got nothing against Levar Burton, and normally the show uses him well, but I have no desire to see him try and get his groove back. The episode handles the create of the holo-hottie as well as could be expected, but this is a contrived idea (I sometimes wonder if Picard shouldn't check in with his crew every Monday, just to see what psychological issues will be determining their missions that week), and it takes some strain to get from "I need to study the designers of the *Enterprise's* engines" to "I have to beg Picard to give me back my sweet, sweet electronic love muffin." "Trap" goes out of its way to avoid making Geordi appear needy or desperate, having Dr. Leah Brahms (Susan Gibeny), the scientist-hologram who helps him save the ship, appear without Geordi ever directly requesting her. But it *is* weird, however it happens, and the flirting between them is odd. It's like watching someone's sexual fantasy play out in public. If Geordi was a kid, this would've been fine, but he's a grown man, and he doesn't just want to hold hands with the ladies. However neutered *TNG* feels most of the time, it can't completely cover up the fact that this isn't just making friends; this is a lonely man creating a connection with adult possibilities, with a phantom who can't ever deliver on those possibilities.

There's a subtle implication here that the computer itself decided to make Brahms, in order to express its connection to Geordi. Once again, the program on the 'deck shows itself capable of far more than anyone on the ship realizes. It stretches the parameters of Geordi's request in the character's creation (note how the first thing she does is make physical contact), Leah is self-aware, and at the end of the episode, she tells Geordi that she is, essentially, the engines, and that "Every time you touch it, it's me." Apart from reminding me of a *Futurama*, I do think this premise could work, and I like that it's only suggested here, and not outright stated; I could very well be over-reading. Whether I am or not, that doesn't eliminate those off-putting undercurrents. *TNG's* earnestness can work very well for the show (it's, again, why I liked "The Bonding" as much as I did), but it can also miss unsettling subtext in its unwillingness to show its heroes as anything less than totally swell, utterly wonderful folks. Normally, that's fine,

but there's something so miserable at the center of Geordi's situation that by pretending it's all perfectly healthy and normal makes the character appear paradoxically more off-putting.

As for the technological MacGuffin that gives us a reason for all these shenanigans: the *Enterprise* is floating through the wreckage of Alderaan, I mean Orelious IX, doing whatever it is one does in the ruins of planet that was blown to pieces a thousand years ago, when they find a Promelian Battle Cruiser in mint condition. Picard goes full nerd at the prospect, telling everyone how he used to build ships in a bottle, and insisting that he be a part of the away team that visits the cruiser, over Riker's fervent objections. Given the title of the episode, I'd assumed Riker's objections were going to be proven correct, but Picard, Data, and Worf don't find anything of note beyond some desiccated corpses and a captain's log. There is a trap here, but it's not the Promelian's fault; instead, the *Enterprise* is faced with the same danger that killed the crew of the cruiser a millennium ago, a group of hidden acetone assimilators, generators which steal the ship's power and drain her reserve.

So this is science, but stripped down the lingo and the science can be converted to a basic problem: the more energy the ship puts out, the more energy they lose, and since you can't really hang out in space with expending at least a *little* power (given that everyone needs to breathe and so forth), well, you can see the dilemma. While Geordi works towards a solution with his private Demon Seed, Picard, Riker, and the others study the logs from the cruiser in an effort to determine just what it is they're up against. It's not the most thrilling reveal imaginable, especially since once again, we have dead aliens doing the dirty work (the universe is littered with this crap. You could've just had a whole *Trek* series about a team of specialists who fly around defusing it, if that weren't already so obviously the *Enterprise*'s main function), but "Trap" does manage to blend Geordi's storyline with the rest of the crew's efforts, so that both are crucial in saving the ship.

Geordi's ultimate decision, to trust human intuition over machine, connects vaguely to his relationship troubles, although I'm not exactly sure how. (Don't think so hard, maybe? Oh, wait, it's the "I don't need the feather, I can fly on my own!" moral.) He delivers the hilariously awful line, "The answer lies in our own computer, the mind," like it's some kind of stunning revelation. Ooo, really? Our *minds* are awesome? I had no idea! If I want read more about it, maybe I should check my local library. The poor guy is saddled with a ton of groaners here, and while "mind-computer" is probably the worst of them, "Another woman who won't get personal with me on the holodeck," has the ring of a gag that probably looked better on page than it does on screen. Burton's always been saddled with corny gags, so maybe it's just a question of exposure--putting roughly half the episode on his back makes the Reader's Digest humor harder to ignore.

Like "Bonding," I like "Trap" more for what it's trying to do than for the end result, although I think "Bonding" is the better episode. "Trap"'s attempt to graft a traditional young geek plot onto a supposedly full adult male falters because the scrubbed-clean sunshine of *TNG* has a difficult time dealing with unpleasant, unwieldy concepts like obsession and alienation. But on the surface, it's still a decent chunk of fluff, with all the usual likable faces we've come to care about doing their usual shtick. The big climax shifts entirely to Picard's shoulders, as he takes over the helm to pilot the *Enterprise* out of the debris field. It's the best part of the episode, and a comforting that reminder that by now in the show's run, even when things threaten to go off course, there's always a steady hand to get us back on track.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- The music is even worse here than it was in "The Bonding." I kept expecting "Just You And I" to break out during Geordi's scenes with Leah.

- Susan Gibney, who's manages to give Leah just enough air of mystery to make the episode's final scenes with her work, is a TV regular; she even popped up in an episode of *Lost*.
- Picard is very frustrated that no one made ships in bottles when they were boys. Data: "I was never a boy."
- Next week it's "The Enemy" and "The Price."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Enemy"/"The Price"



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"The Enemy"

Or The One Where Worf Won't Give Blood, and Geordi and a Romulan play Dennis Quaid and Louis Gossett, Jr.

So you have Superman. He's faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, he can fly, he's got the heat vision, the ability to re-build the Great Wall of China should the need arise, that super creepy amnesia-inducing kiss. (Or maybe Lois just has a reset-button in the back of her throat--but in that case, Superman would need a really long tongue...) There isn't much he can't do, and that's a problem, because if you want to tell stories about Superman, you have to put him in situations he can't immediately resolve. *The Case Of The Burning Building* loses its flare (ha!) if a quick puff of super breath extinguishes the flames. A bank robbery isn't all that thrilling when it's two jittery guys with hand-guns against an invulnerable alien who can punch really, really hard.

That's why you need kryptonite. And that's why, he said, hoping no one would remember that he'd used the same metaphor in a *TOS* review months and months ago, the writers on *TNG* keep coming up with new ways to render the massive technological and tactical capabilities of the *Enterprise* just useless enough to last out the hour. We've had glitches, we've had beings with powers that make warp drive look like a power walk, and in "The Enemy," we have a planet where natural conditions make traditional exploration nearly impossible. Galorndon Core (dig that name; it sounds like the title of some obscure cult science fiction novel from the late sixties) is full of all kinds of crazy atmospheric and ground-level conditions that make it difficult for the *Enterprise* to beam down an away team, let alone for that away team to get much work done. Add that to the fact that the Core tends to damage synaptic function after prolonged exposure, and it's probably not a place anyone would want to visit for long.

But here come Riker, Worf, and Geordi to do some poking around, because a distress signal was sent out, and that's what our heroes do: heroic, rescue-type stuff. Geordi's visor can't make much headway in all the chaos (which makes me wonder why they brought him along at all--he's the Chief Engineer, so I guess they thought he could gauge the condition of whatever wreckage they found? Or else they didn't know his visor would have some problems, or else they watched last week's episode and decided the poor nerd really needs to get out more), and the three officers split up to assess the situation. Because, yeah, when you're someplace where you can't see more than five feet ahead of you, splitting up is always a good idea.

While Worf and Riker find a Romulan bleeding out on the rocks, Geordi manages to fall into a pit. So he gets left behind when Worf and Riker beam back up to the *Enterprise* with the injured captive. Two things to note here: Riker gets incredibly frustrated at stranding one of his men, and that frustration will hang over him through most of the episode. It's tremendously endearing, even if it doesn't make him all that easy to work with--this is someone who doesn't just get upset when things go badly, he takes it personally, and he's not happy until Geordi is back where he belongs. The other point to note: Geordi's repeated cries of "WOOOOOORFFFFF!" reminded me an awful lot of Michael's endless "WAAAAAAAAALLT!"ing on *Lost*. Now that *Lost* has left us, I say we change the meme up, and throw down old school geek props.

It's here that "Enemy" breaks into two storylines. The first, and more predictable, one follows Geordi on the Core. He meets another Romulan survivor from the crashed ship, and the two have to find some way to work together in order to get off the planet. The second storyline stays with the *Enterprise*, as Beverly Crusher fights to save the dying Romulan, and Picard enters a battle of the wits with a Romulan commander, Tomalak (Andreas Katsulas, who had a major role on *Babylon 5*, but who I remember as the one-armed man from the movie version of *The Fugitive*), who's demanding his men be returned to him. Both plots are about how we deal with the people (in the broad sense) we hate, and how some circumstances force us to compromise that hate in the name of survival; and how some circumstances do not. What makes "Enemy" so good is that neither story becomes pedantic, and that the plot developments in both are largely character driven and respectful to all sides of the issue. It's an exciting episode that doesn't cheat to give us easy answers, and while the tone is generally optimistic, there's enough darkness here to balance the sunlight.

Geordi's plight the episode's most obvious hook, since it's the kind of conflict that most shows of this sort trot out at some point or another: the stranded cast-member, alone in a hostile environment. While most of the *Enterprise* kryptonite we see on the series is introduced to create a viable threat against the ship, something that can't simply be waved away with a few quick photon bursts, here, the conditions on the Core revolve around making sure La Forge's abandonment (however unintentional) isn't an easy fix. The planet's turbulent atmosphere means that the crew has to wait for a window before they can beam down to search for the engineer. So Geordi's stuck, and it's not a nice place to be stuck, and that other Romulan he finds, Bochra, isn't exactly friendly.

Much like the stranded cast-member is a familiar stand-by, the "enemies overcoming mutual mistrust" conceit is not exactly breaking new barriers. But Geordi and Bochra's growing bond also fits in with one of *TNG*'s core philosophies: that, in general, conscious life forms can reach an understanding with each other if they can manage not to shoot each other in the head long enough. I like Geordi a lot more here than I did in "Booby Trap," because here, his genial, cheerfully sarcastic nature doesn't seem nearly so forced. His dorkiness is an asset; where someone like Riker might've been more vehement about forcing Bochra to listen to reason, Geordi lays out the problem, makes some jokes when the Romulan won't bend, and then gives up. Geordi doesn't have the force of personality to try and bend someone to his will, and that makes Bochra's eventual capitulation, and the pride the two of them share at their eventual success, charmingly low-key. There's no big revelatory moment here, no speeches about how everyone needs to get along; it's just some sarcasm, some obstinacy, and then business. (It's also nice that neither of them turn out to be pregnant.)

This is the optimism side of the "Enemy" coin: two individuals finding honor and mutual respect over common ground. Also, we get Picard taking that Romulan commander to town, which always puts me in a good mood whether it's optimistic or not. (I guess it's optimism in the sense that smart, strong-willed people can defeat jerks?) But it's not all good news. The Romulan that Riker and Worf found is dying, and he needs a blood transfusion if there's any chance he'll survive long enough to be returned to his own kind. Beverly determines that Worf is the only crew-member aboard the *Enterprise* with plasma a close enough match to the Romulan's own, and she asks him if he'd be willing to give his blood. Worf, who lost his parents to a Romulan attack, refuses. The decision is a difficult one, so he talks it over with Riker. Picard calls Worf in and asks him to donate the blood, since the Romulan's survival might be key in forestalling an a battle between the *Enterprise* and Tomalak's ship. Worf still refuses. Then the Romulan dies.

That's pretty huge. Picard manages to hold off Tomalak anyway (and the sudden appearance of *another* Romulan survivor from what Tomalak assured Picard was a "one-man vessel" doesn't hurt), but that doesn't change the fact that Worf is faced with a moral decision; he opts for what we would term as the understandable, yet still immoral option; and there's no reversal. He doesn't change his mind after the last heart-to-heart with Picard, he doesn't soften towards the Romulan when Beverly asks Worf in to Sick Bay. (This is actually a tactical error on the good doctor's part, since the dying Romulan tells Worf he'd rather die than than be polluted with Klingon blood.) Beverly doesn't come up with some new cure in the last minute, and Worf is never shown to regret his decision. It's almost as if the writers were speaking when Picard refuses to order Worf to do the transfusion, even though Worf freely admits that he will obey such an order, if it is given. Conflicts may work themselves out in the long run, and there's hope in the quick friendship that develops between Geordi and Bochra, but that hope doesn't heal all wounds. Not everything can be forgiven, not even by the best of us.

Grade: A-

Stray Observations:

- Worf's subplot here could be a shot at the stubborn rage of his species, but it doesn't play that way. It's really more a testament to the respect he's earned for himself, and the respect he has for his commanding officers,
- "I never lie when I have sand in my shoes, Commodore."
- I'm sure it was helpful in the long term trust-building-wise, but I can't help but think Geordi is kind of an idiot when he rescues Bochra without taking away his phaser first.
- Picard actually *begs* Worf to give the Romulan his blood. Everybody seems friendly afterwards, but if there's a KP duty on the *Enterprise*, I'm guessing Worf will be stuck on it for the next decade or so.

"The Price"

Or The One With The Wormhole, The Ferengi, And A Smarmy Sonofabitch

Early in "The Price"--during the very first scene, in fact--I got worried. Deanna Troi is checking her mail, and she finds she has multiple letters from her mother. When I heard this, the flashbacks hit: I saw Lwaxana Troi hitting on Riker, I heard her shrill, petulant voice, and the full, agonizing weight of every one of her awful, awful guest appearances washed over me until I nearly lost the will to go on. It was too soon, I shouted at the screen. Didn't I just have to review the episode where she hits on the holographic bartender? I thought of writing my resignation letter, realized that wouldn't be permanent enough, and I wondered how hard it would be to fake my own death. But, y'know, I've got a girlfriend now, and she'd probably want to come with, and who knows if she could get the time off work...

While I went tried to find some way out of the apparent apocalypse, I left the episode playing, and I realized fairly quickly that it was all a false alarm. Lwaxana's appearance here is in name only, used to try and remind us that Troi has a personal life, and, presumably, make us care what happens in that personal life. But that didn't mean I was out of the woods yet. "The Price," like "Enemy," has two concurrent storylines, both revolving around a single event, and while the time we spend watching Riker dicker over a wormhole, and watching Data and Geordi investigate the stability of that wormhole, is entertaining, staple *TNG* stuff, the time we spend with Troi isn't. Oh, it's still a staple of the series, but it's not much fun. Troi takes a lover, everyone! Time to strap in.

I'm never happy when I have to bash Troi-centric episodes, because I don't object to them at all in theory. Every major character on the show deserves their time in the spotlight, and if anything, that goes doubly for the under-used, under-represented women. With Tasha Yar nearly two seasons gone, we've only got three recurring females left on *TNG*, and one of them, Guinan, spends most of her time being mysterious and wise. Dr. Crusher stays in the Sick Bay, flirts with Picard, and occasionally gets mopey about her dead husband; Troi as the ship counselor is called in whenever a writer wants to explain what a character is feeling without having that character come out and say it themselves. (That tends to make people *so ANGRY*.) Picard, Riker, Worf, Data, Geordi, hell, even Wesley--these are clearly defined, iconic figures. Crusher and Troi are vaguely feminine blurs.

So yes, by all means, please give Marina Sirtis and Gates McFadden more to do, but for god's sake, that doesn't mean providing Troi with yet another overly aggressive love interest. This woman is a competent professional who's spent her life confronting emotions, working to understand them, and working to help people be as sane as they can be. Shouldn't she at least have a spine by now? Whatever problems I had with "The Bonding," at least Troi was granted the dignity and respect of her position. Here, she's reduced to a whimpering mess by some jag-off negotiator, and it happens almost exactly the same way it happened in "Loud As A Whisper." She sees the guy, is clearly instantly smitten with him, he comes to her room uninvited and unannounced (catching her in the 23rd century equivalent of googling his name), gropes his way into a dinner invite, and before you know it, we're getting into the massage oil and pillow talk.

It's distressing, and the more I think about it, the more frustrated I get. There's nothing wrong with a smart character making stupid romantic choices. It happens, and it helps us to identify with the character, because everybody's done dumb stuff in the name of love. It becomes a problem when those stupid choices make up most of what we see of a character's personal life. If Troi were better defined, if she weren't simply a generic stand in for "chicks get feelings and stuff," this wouldn't be as much an issue. But because she spends so much of her time on the show simply stating the obvious and looking concerned, her apparent vulnerability for greasy dudes with wandering hands is difficult to endure. (To be honest, I'm not sure how much I'd enjoy these scenes even if Troi *was* the next Ellen Ripley or Starbuck. But then, I think Ripley would've taken one look at this guy and shot him out an airlock. Then she and Starbuck would've gone and played pool. And had adventures!)

There's more going on here, thankfully, so I'm going to talk about that until everything stops being quite so red. The Bhavini have managed to acquire a singular galactic phenomenon: an apparently stable wormhole. Theoretically, travel via wormhole would be a tremendous boon to whatever race controlled it, as it cuts down on flight time to an incredible degree; the one the Bhavini are selling, for instance, can send a ship light years away, a hundred years worth of travelling at the fastest warp speed known to man accomplished in a few minutes. What makes this wormhole even more important is that it's apparently stable. That's unique; every other wormhole known to science operates too inconsistently to be of any use to travelers. So the Bhavini are selling theirs in an attempt to make their race self-sufficient, and their offer has attracted a number of interested parties, including the Federation (represented by Riker), the Caldonians, the Chrysalids, and, in a last minute twist, the Ferengi.

The Ferengi are their usual annoying selves, this time played largely for sniveling comic relief than any true menace. They get punished for their misdeeds and avarice, as always; when Geordi and Data fly through the wormhole to test it, a shuttle of Ferengi follow them, and they wind up stranded a century distant when they won't listen to Geordi's warnings that the hole is showing signs of instability. Really, though, the Ferengi here are more a tool of Devinoni Ral, the Chrysalids negotiator, Troi's eventual lover, and basic snide twerp. Ral is played by Matt McCoy, a character actor who I'll always remember as the man who took over for Steve Guttenberg in the *Police Academy* movies. He can be effective in the right role (he was great in a small part in *L.A. Confidential*), but his turn as Ral doesn't entirely work. I can buy him as a smart manipulator, as someone willing to use his quarter-Betazoid gift of empathy to make his job easier, but as flawed compromised individual with a soul worth saving, I ain't buying.

And that's a problem, because the climax of "Price" has Troi revealing Ral's questionable tactics to Picard and everyone else, and it should be a dramatic moment, as she betrays her lover both out of frustration at his misdeeds, and because of her desire to force him to better himself. Instead, it's primarily satisfying because it wipes the grin off Ral's face for a few seconds. Once that satisfaction passes, I couldn't help wondering why it took Troi so long in the first place. It can be difficult to convincingly show love in fiction, because the experience of falling for someone is both highly personal and curiously universal; the details and shared moments are what give the feeling texture, but the rush and elation of it are things that we all share. So you've got to find some way to make the small moments appear distinct and honest so that the big moments feel earned. Nothing about Troi and Ral's romance ever seemed more than writers using poor Troi as badly as Ral used his opponents--simply a matter of pushing her to the right place until she fulfilled their needs.

Plus, the one scene we get when we try and do some girl talk, with Beverly and Troi engaging in some hilarious aerobics while Troi gushes and Beverly nods appreciably, is about as dated as this series ever gets. (I love how we get the spandex outfits, which is so hot and everything, but the outfits cover more skin than their regular uniforms.) What of the subtler aspects of *TNG*'s rise in quality in the third season is its increasing adeptness as this kind of multi-level storytelling. In "The Enemy," we have Geordi stranded, Worf's crisis, and Picard's battle of wills, and all revolve around each other, intricately connected but still managing to be distinct. It's an impressive balancing act, because it provides the opportunity for the ensemble to show off its individual parts while still maintaining that feeling of unity; there's no sense that we're pausing the "main" action to see how Geordi's doing, because each different subplot has equal importance to the central problem. "The Price" ostensibly works the same way, with Troi's relationship with Ral connecting back to the financial battle for control over the wormhole, but instead of creating a richer episode, the bifurcation reinforces how ill-used Troi is in comparison to the rest of the cast. We don't need to have an episode where she learns to stand up to a man, we really don't. If that's the best the show can give her, it might be better to leave her on the sidelines.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- I really, really don't understand why the *TNG* writers persist in the belief that extreme, unwarranted aggressiveness is a turn-on.
- How is it that the romantic interludes between Ral and Troi have all the tackiness of softcore porn but without any of the actual titillation?
- In her defense, Troi's last line to Ral is a really good burn: "I already have a job as a counselor."
- I'm on vacation next week, but join me on September 2, when we take a look at "The Vengeance Factor" and "The Defector."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Vengeance Factor"/"The Defector"



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"The Vengeance Factor"

or *The One With the Touching and the Killing and the Lady Riker Shoots*

As a kid, Riker and Troi's relationship always puzzled me. To me, relationships were essentially binary; either you were with someone or you weren't. I could understand a situation where two people wanted each other but were kept apart by the vagaries of fate and bad choices, but there's no hoary plot device standing between Number One and the *Enterprise's* counselor. They're both comfortably aware of how the other one feels, and while we don't have a clear sense of their history (and, honestly, I'm not sure we need one; I'm not clamoring for a "When William Met Deanna" flashback episode), we understand them well enough to know that neither is a bad person, or would've hurt the other through cruelty. Younger Me thought that was enough for a relationship to work, and I was baffled whenever the pair would exchange some intimate glance before embarking on an affair with a random stranger. It's not even a "will they/won't they." It's a "they did, and who knows?"

I'm older now, and while I wouldn't go so far as to say I'm wiser, I do have a slightly better grasp of how complicated a relationship can actually be. I like the Troi/Riker dynamic quite a bit now, because I like how it's underplayed. Whatever angst may have gone down between these two is mostly over at this point, and when Riker says, "I'll be happy if you make her happy" to a potential paramour of Troi's, there's no insincerity in the statement. The selflessness on *TNG* can get tiring, especially in the show's first two seasons when we were repeatedly reminded just how wonderful humanity is, but it works very well in these smaller moments. So often in television, we see characters at their worst because that's where the drama lies. It's nice to have a show that's willing to say, "These are

all good, smart people," and then not immediately have Wesley cheating on an exam, or Picard struggling to hide his secret addiction to Substance D.

"The Vengeance Factor" isn't really about Troi and Riker--it's about the *Enterprise* trying to broker a settlement between a race and its outcasts in order to protect Federation property, and about the lengths that people will go to in order to create meaning out of horror. (That's what revenge is, at least partly: the attempt to create structure in a senseless act by giving it a story arc, and by giving yourself agency inside that arc. It's not just "everyone I loved was horribly murdered," it's "When the people I loved were murdered, I became a ruthless killing machine, and devoted myself to finding justice." The difference between *News At 11* and a miniseries.) Riker does have a tentative romantic relationship with an alien, though, and it just got me thinking that whatever the differences he and Troi must've had when they parted ways (friendly or not, there had to've been *some* disparity), they've found a way to make an effective peace between them. It's nice to see people acting like adults, even as we watch others follow through on self-destruction.

Yeah, that's pretty tenuous, even for me. I liked "Vengeance" okay, but I had a hard time connecting to its main plot. Yuta, the seemingly young woman with the killer touch, had her share of interesting moments, but this is the sort of familiar story that people have been telling ever since we realized that rocks were harder than skulls. Strip away the science fiction, and it's just a revenge tragedy, and in order for a revenge tragedy to work, it has to grab us in some way. There has to be a new angle, some hook that can distinguish this one from all the ones that came before it. Either Yuta's pain is distinctive, or her chosen method of vengeance is so unusual, or else there's a whole lot of unexpected bloodshed. Or maybe there's a talking horse, I dunno, *something*. I go to this well a lot (hmmm, maybe *I* need a talking horse), but it's important, and it's probably the most important on TV. Given how episodic shows work, every series is invariably going to visit well-worn ideas, because you need something to riff off of, and because there's a certain charge out of seeing new characters dealing with old concepts. But there needs to be personality there, or else it's simply a matter of marking time.

"Factor" tries to spice things up, I'll give it that much credit. It's hard to connect Yuta's thirst for revenge with the goofy looking bad guys she targets (I'm really sad I already made an *Ice Pirates* joke in an earlier review, but I will say that the costume designers for this show must've raided the set of an Italian *Mad Max* rip off), and since we never see any of the people who die, it's hard to get all that worked up at how sad their loss is. Yuta is an odd one. She's genetically modified to be practically immortal (our heroes find out that's she's been at her work for decades), and she murders her enemies via a biological contagion designed to be fatal only to the clan she's targeting. She can kill with a touch, but only if she's touching certain people. This is fun concept, but it also limits the kind of collateral damage that revenge storylines usually trade in.

So it's more interesting to view all of this craziness in how it affects the *Enterprise* and its crew. The reason Picard and everyone get involved here is that the Gatherers, a violent group of exiles from the Acamaran race, have been laying waste to Federation outposts. The only way to deal with the problem is to try and get the Gatherers back to Acamar, where they can hopefully be re-integrated into their old society. But that means peace talks, which makes me wonder once again if *Enterprise* isn't Starfleet slang for "shit detail." Yeah, I know, it's prestigious and important and they wouldn't send anyone but they're most trusted yada yada, but it doesn't seem like anyone on the ship really enjoys this kind of work. Or maybe I'm just projecting. It's safe to say Picard isn't having a fun time, at least. He makes an excellent negotiator between the two parties, once everyone is in place, but I think if he had his wish, he'd be out exploring.

At least Riker tries to have some fun. He puts the moves on Yuta, who comes aboard the ship in the guise of one of Sovereign Marouk's attendants. (The Sovereign is a big Acamarian VIP whose change of heart towards the Gatherers never comes across as particularly character driven. Obviously Marouk has to be more amenable to a

settlement in order for Yuta's actions to have consequences; if Marouk refused to entertain the possibility of a truce, then the murders wouldn't really be threatening anything, and we wouldn't have that really excellent final confrontation. But while I like to be an optimist about the capacity of intelligent life forms to change their opinions when faced with superior reasoning, I'm suspicious when it happens as instantaneously as it does here.) Riker is yet another aggressive move-putter-onner, but in his case, the aggression never rises above forthright friendliness. I like that--I'm not sure how well it would work in the real world, but in the sexually egalitarian universe of *TNG*, there's something sensible about being friendly and encouraging to someone you find attractive, and letting them come to whatever conclusions they like. Maybe that's what Riker gets out of his friendship with Troi--he knows there's at least somebody on the *Enterprise* who's still into him, whether or not they're together, so why sweat over individual assignations?

One might question the logic of becoming romantically entangled with a member of a diplomatic party during a tense, potentially life-threatening negotiation, but that never becomes an issue. Riker cares about Yuta, but that caring doesn't extend towards sacrificing his better judgment. After Yuta kills a Gatherer named Volnath, Riker and the others work to find out what caused the death, and when he's finally forced to confront Yuta directly, during a meeting between Marouk, Picard, and Chorgan, the leader of the Gatherers, he ends up killing her to stop her from killing Chorgan. It's a tense scene in an episode that, considering the stakes, is generally not all that thrilling. Riker explains the situation to everyone in the room, Yuta makes a move towards Chorgan, and Riker hits her with the phaser on stun. She falters, then stands straight and takes another step forward. Riker fires again, Yuta fumbles, but she keeps going forward. Riker begs her to stop. She doesn't listen.

There are some things in "Vengeance" I liked quite a bit--I liked that Brull, the Gatherer who joins the *Enterprise* in order to lead them to Chorgan, starts off as kind of a moron but forms an oddly charming attachment to Wesley, sharing with the Boy Blunder his desire for a better world for his own children. I like Picard's frustration at the tedium of diplomatic work. And I like the the concept of the episode overall, though I suspect it may have been better served by jettisoning the Yuta plot entirely, and dealing more with the difficulties of trying to form a lasting peace between two parties on uneven ground. But dropping Yuta would've meant losing Riker's final shot, a kill shot, one that vaporizes his brief paramour into nothingness. It's not a scene that works all that well if you think about it (why not beam Yuta back to the *Enterprise* where she'd be harmless? Why not keep shooting her with stun until she collapsed?), but in the moment, it's intense, shocking stuff. Everybody's friendly on the *Enterprise*. Until you take that one step too far.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- For a slow-aging, Typhoid Mary, last of her race murderess, Yuta is really boring. Maybe Riker has a thing for forehead ridges.

"The Defector"

Or The One With Painless Suicide and The Romulan Sting

I'd like to think I have a code. Maybe not a code, exactly; I don't pretend I have any set rules to getting through my oh so stressful life as full-time librarian's assistant, part-time Internet snarkologist. But I'd like to think that there are lines out there, and that, with someone of them, were the situation to arise there I'd have to make a choice between one side or the other, I would be able to choose between the two based on some internally consistent ethics and morality. Like, if I wanted to join some kind of a club, and the club told me in order to join, I'd have to shoot a homeless person, I think it's safe to say, I would say no to this club, even if they had a really cool tree fort and were

offering me a free gun. Or to make it a trickier call, if I was being offered money to, say, give something a favorable review, I would totally never do that, even if I could use the cash because of student loans and everything else, and it's not like anybody cares about my opinion in the long run, so maybe give me a call sometime and we can work something out?

Anyway, what I'm saying is, I like to think that I could be a good man if I was ever thrown into a situation where being a good man meant more hardship than just not running over slow people in the crosswalk. (My favorites are the ones who wait till the No Walk signal goes up before crossing directly into traffic. I think they are all Satan.) In "The Defector," a Romulan commander betrays his race because he believes that, in doing so, he can help make the universe safer for his children. It's a monumental decision, an attempt by an individual to take a moral stance not just against an action, but against the general philosophy of his entire government, and in doing so, the Romulan leaves behind everything he's ever known and loved, forever. Then he finds out that his actions have all been planned out by the ones he sought to sabotage, rendering his sacrifice pointless. It's a dark, dark episode, despite the occasional moments of levity, and it ends with a suicide. So, no huge surprises that Ron Moore is the main writer.

If you reverse the perspectives here, and look at the situation from Picard's perspective, the Moore-ian themes become even more clear. "Defector" is about trust, and how difficult it is to define "truth" even under ideal circumstances--not that Starfleet's shaky relations with the Romulans are anything close to ideal. I love how "Defector" plays with our expectations. Whenever I watch an episode like this, my impulse is to assume the truth is the opposite of whatever the narrative is currently pushing on me. It's something a lifetime of watching shows and reading stories have taught me; you go against the flow. The least obvious suspect in a murder mystery stands a good chance of being the killer. Unless you're dealing with a clever writer, in which case the least obvious suspect might simply be a red herring designed to catch you off-guard, and it's really the *most* obvious suspect who's responsible. Unless you're dealing with a writer that's even more clever than that, and it's some kind of double bluff, and then it turns out everything's this crazy fat guy's hallucination and the whole movie turns into a piece of shit!

Ahem. All I'm saying is, the more you watch this stuff, the more patterns you start to suss out, and the more prepared you are to recognize those patterns before the story really wants you to be aware of them. It's not something I do on purpose. I'll admit, I get a certain thrill of pride when I figure out a twist ahead of time, but I've been burned by this before too. (I was very pleased with myself for figuring out the big reveal of *A Beautiful Mind* based on the trailer, but I also spent the last hour of *12 Monkeys* really hoping I was wrong about the ending. I wasn't, and that meant I was too busy getting pissy to really enjoy the movie.) Which means I really get a kick out of a twist that catches me off-guard. "The Defector" does a great job at this, by providing us with a mystery: is Admiral Jarok, the titular turncoat, telling the truth about Romulan operations? Or is he part of some larger scheme designed to trick the *Enterprise* into fumbling into an ambush? The episode spends so much time focused on this issue, letting us spend time with Jarok to decide if we trust him, following Picard and the others as they pick apart the holes in Jarok's story, that it fools us (or fooled me, anyway) into thinking this was, like my adolescent thoughts on relationships, a purely binary issue. Either Jarok was telling the truth or he wasn't. That was all that mattered.

And then, of course, it doesn't. It's that fabled extra step you hear about in reviews a lot, that final turn of the screw that takes a story from good (and this episode is very, very good) to spectacular, simply by throwing us in a direction that we don't see coming in a way that still works organically with what we've already seen, and that actually works to emphasize or throw into a new light all the details we've accumulated up to that point. Jarok, it turns out, isn't a liar. He believes that the current tense relations between his people and the Federation have to be put to an end, and he's willing to sacrifice his career and even his life in the name of that end. To find out that he was used the whole time is both effectively upsetting from an emotional standpoint (by the end of the episode, Jarok had become one of my favorite one-off characters on the series), as well as reinforcing the need for Jarok's actions even while rendering

them moot. It's a devastating reveal, and Moore deserves credit for refusing to soften it with any kind of happy ending.

There are a ton of great scenes in "The Defector." The cold open is terrific: we start with a pair of random guys standing by a campfire, talking Shakespearean English, and then Data shows up, dressed to match them, and we listen to more of *Henry V*. Finally we get a cut to Picard, in his standard uniform, watching the whole scene with a tremendous enthusiasm, and it's not too hard to put the pieces together. (Figuring this out is made slightly more difficult by the fact that Patrick Stewart is actually playing one of the random guys. He's heavily made up, but you can still see the actor under the make-up, and his voice is distinctive enough that even if you missed the features, you'd recognize the tone. There's no reference made to the doubling in the episode itself. I can see making the argument that it's a distraction, but really, if there's any Shakespeare to be had in *TNG*, it's only fitting that Stewart should have some part in it, no matter how small.) The scene speaks of war, which is thematically appropriate, and it's a good reminder that Data is still striving to be human, but really, I think I just like this because it's one of those cool hang-out scenes that make the *Enterprise* feel more like a living, breathing world.

Data does some further research on being alive by spending some time with Jarok (who is played by James Sloyan. Sloyan does excellent work; Jarok skirts the edge of hamminess, but the character is an effective mixture of off-putting arrogance and charming directness. He's likable by the end because he makes no real effort to be liked). Unsurprisingly, Jarok is willing to open up with Data, and Data creates a program replicating a part of Jarok's homeworld in the holodeck, in order to provide some comfort for the Admiral for all he's left behind. The scene where Data shows Jarok the program is very smartly done. It's no surprise that Jarok would reject the illusion, because everything we've gotten to know about the character has told us this is someone who values plain-speaking and truth above all else. What makes this work is that Jarok is initially overcome by the sight of his past. It makes him more vulnerable, and easier to care about.

Picard gets some terrific dialog with Jarok as well, where Picard expresses his frustrations and the difficulties of knowing what to do with the information Jarok offers, and Jarok confesses he has a daughter, and how that daughter was the prime motivation for his decision to defect. Moore would show himself to be a genius on *Battlestar Galactica* in dealing with characters struggling to find common ground, even while we, in the audience, sympathize with both sides. You can get good drama out of a unified group working towards a seemingly impossible goal, but you can get great drama out of that group if unification is never taken for granted, if each individual is granted some measure of individual desire, and if cooperation relies as much on compromise and faith as it does on a common enemy. It's easy to understand why Picard is so suspicious throughout "Defector." By the end of the episode, it's just as easy to understand why Jarok did what he did. You want them to come to some kind of mutual truce, but there's no assumption that will happen, and when the truce does arrive, it's not a happy one.

So yeah, Jarok commits suicide at the end of "Defector." Has a character ever offed themselves at the conclusion of a *TNG* episode before? I don't think we've had many suicides on the series, and there's a difference between a death before the third commercial break, and one before the end credits. It's a bleak note to end on, and the letter Jarok leaves to his wife and daughter is a heartbreaking final touch. He knows there's no way that letter could be delivered as current relations between the Federation and the Romulan empire stand. But he leaves it anyway, both as a symbol of why he sacrificed so much, and in the hope that maybe, someday, things could change. His voice may have been alone back home, but he won't be the last to speak out, and maybe, someday, there will be enough so that an individual need not betray all he knows to save all he loves.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- Hey, it's Tomalak again! We get a reference or two to "The Enemy." And how awesome Picard's trick of pulling two Klingon ships out of a proverbial hat?
- "I expected more than an idle threat from you, Picard." "Then you shall have it."
- Next week, we look at "The Hunted" and "The High Ground."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Hunted"/"The High Ground"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[9/09/10 10:00AM](#)

"The Hunted"

Or The One Where Rambo Beats The Crap Out Of Worf

We like to pretend that war makes sense. Or we used to, anyway. There are times, we'd say, when men and women have to take up arms in the defense of their country, and in doing so, these men and women become heroes willing to make the greatest sacrifice necessary to preserve what they love. But it's trickier than that. We spend our lives being taught that killing, that really any kind of extreme violence, is wrong, and that in order to be the best human beings we can, we have to learn to empathize with strangers. To be an efficient soldier, though, you have to short-circuit that teaching; you have to embrace impulses that civilization has spent centuries trying to submerge. Then there's the chaos of the battlefield, the horrors and destruction and despair that can't really be put into recognizable human terms. And then you come home, and some jerk starts picking on your girl outside a bar, and because your instincts have been altered to the point where your first response to a threat is a permanent one, you kill the idiot, you get put in jail for murder, and when you finally get free, you're sent home on a plane with John Malkovich, of all people.

Okay, so not maybe not every problem eventually turns into *Con Air* (although I have statistics here that would surprise you), but my point is, war is just one of those things we pretend can fit into the world, and society has a

hard time dealing with the warriors it no longer needs. That's what "The Hunted" is all about. It's a simple story with some dark undercurrents, and it's probably familiar if you've watched your fair share of action movies. I mentioned Rambo above—Roga Danar (Jeff McCarthy), the ultra bad-ass who drives the conflict here, shares Rambo's instincts and ability for making the most out of the circumstances, as well as Rambo's problems playing nice. But Rambo is only the first thing that comes to mind. This is a story that's been done a hundred times before, in movies and on TV. (There's also a William Friedkin movie that shares this episode's title; it basically takes the *First Blood* arc and gives it a darker, and arguably more honest, spin.) TNG isn't the most flexible show out there, but the basic, "Let's fly our ship around and see what happens" approach means that it doesn't take too much effort to throw our heroes into something archetypal and see what happens.

What happens here: the *Enterprise* is visiting Angosia III. The planet leaders (headed by James Cromwell!) want entrance into the Federation, and it's Picard's job to poke around and see if they're ready to become members in the galaxy's coolest club. He and Riker pay their respects, and everything seems on the up and up (Riker finds the place stuffy, which makes sense; along with Worf, he represents the *Enterprise*'s most battle-ready contingent, and while we never really get the sense that Riker has difficulties playing friendly, the fact that he's not comfortable with the Angosians is a subtle piece of foreshadowing that a more aggressive individual might find it the planet even harder to cope with), until a prisoner escapes from a maximum security facility on Lunar V. Cromwell protests that his people aren't prepared for the escaped prisoner's aggressive behavior, and Picard offers to help catch the villain and bring him to justice. So far so good.

Except the prisoner proves a lot trickier to catch than even Picard expects, showing a grasp of tactics and a willingness to take bold actions that turns what should be a routine hunt into something a lot more exciting. And then, once Roga Danar is safely in the *Enterprise*'s most secure holding cell (after nearly beating the crap out of an entire security detail), the situation becomes more complicated, because Troi gets one of her feelings and chats up the prisoner. Roga is dangerous in all kinds of ways. He's ruthless, cunning, and nearly unstoppable; and worse, he may be the victim of his government's arrogance. In the conversation between Picard and Cromwell at the start of the episode, we hear about a war that everyone on Angosia is eager to forget. Roga, and those like him, is a product of that war, a super-soldier with advanced psychological conditioning and genetic enhancements, designed to be the perfect killing machine. (One of those enhancements renders him invisible to the *Enterprise*'s scanners, which makes him impossible to track, as well as serving as a reminder of how his life has essentially been stolen from him.) Once Roga and the others did their job, attempts were made to reintegrate them back into normal society without removing the conditioning or the enhancements. Unsurprisingly, those attempts failed, and Cromwell and the rest of the government tried to push everything under the rug.

TNG sometimes has difficulty presenting this sort of conflict without becoming didactic. (See for example this week's other episode, the fascinating but deeply problematic, "The High Ground") And once it becomes clear what's going on here, there is a tendency to put up Cromwell and the others as easy bad guys. We're never really told what sort of problems Roga and his cohorts caused in polite company, and while we know he's killed some guards, it's easy to justify those murders, or at least view them in a semi-sympathetic light. We're on Roga's side here, partly because Troi and the others are, and partly because he's such an unbelievable bad-ass that it's hard not to root for him. Cromwell and the others (and yes, I realize Cromwell has a character name, but that's just how I think of him) are the sort of hand-wringing, cowardly weaklings that always stop the Real Men from doing their job. There's a hilarious implication in the Rambo series that we never would've lost Vietnam if the government hadn't wussed out and gotten in the military's way, and thankfully, "Hunted" doesn't go that far, but it's still obvious who's side we're supposed to be on by the end.

Which isn't necessarily a bad thing. If I had a criticism of this episode, it would be that it's a little too simple to pin all the blame on government forces that used Roga so callously; but the episode does make an effort to spread the

blame. We hear over and over again that it wasn't just the government, that the "people" were asked how they wanted the soldiers treated, and the "people" decided that kicking them off planet was the safest course of action. Again, though, the "people" make just as obvious scapegoats as Cromwell and his cronies. We see Roga's ruthless efficiency, but Troi and Data are both quickly convinced that Roga would never take another life unless absolutely necessary, so it turns into a question of all those evil, weak-willed civilians, using others to do their dirty work and then discarding them as soon as it becomes convenient. It would've helped if Roga had seemed just a little less reasonable, a little less charismatic; the episode might've made its point more clearly if it'd been more obvious why Roga and those like him were so difficult for regular folks to stomach.

Yet I'm still giving this one the full "A," and I don't have any reservations about the grade whatsoever. "Hunted" may not entirely succeed in applying its metaphorical point to real world situations (that's obviously the intent here, though—there's a lot of very serious, "When will they ever learn?" dialog throughout the episode), but that's not really why I watch *TNG*. Or any *Trek*, really. Specific political messages in fiction are always going to be hit or miss, because when you're telling a story, the story should come first, the lesson second. Otherwise, it's just a lecture with icing. If you want, you can leave "Hunted" with a lot of important concerns over the debt a society owes those who defend it, and the way that society can fail to meet that debt once the immediate crisis has passed. These are big questions, and they're questions worth asking, however clumsily the show manages them. But you don't have to think about them too much to enjoy the episode. The message is there, but while it probably wouldn't stand up under too much scrutiny, it's not so clunky as to distract from the good stuff.

And there is a lot of good stuff here. Roga makes for a terrific anti-hero/threat, nearly Borg-like in his ability to outthink Picard and the others. The first chase sequence is a great teaser, as what seems like an easy hunt (the whole *Enterprise* after one guy?) turns far more taxing than initially assumed, but the real fun begins once Roga manages, in arguably the show's greatest non-main-character moment of bad-assery, to break out of a transporter beam, escape the security detail, figure out how to overload the phasers, beat up Worf, out-manuever Data (who figures out Roga is a big fan of the diversionary tactic, but is unable to use that knowledge to actually prevent Roga's escape), disrupt the *Enterprise*'s power systems, beam himself over to the ship sent to take him back to Lunar V, take over that ship, and then lead a contingent of super soldiers to successfully storm the capital of Angosia III. This takes about ten minutes, and it is incredibly fun to watch. What's so striking is that the episode has us actually rooting against our heroes, not because they're wrong, but because Roga is just so damned good at what he does. Troi and the others spend some time trying to decide the best course of action, but they're mostly just as much an audience to what's happening as we are. Jeff McCarthy does solid work as Roga, balancing the character's frustration, intelligence, and intensity well-enough, but it's Robin Bernheim's script and Cliff Bole's direction that really pulls this together. The action set-pieces in this episode are really effective; I can't think of another ep that worked on quite this level of adrenaline rush.

Still, this is *Star Trek: The Next Generation* not *Star Trek: That Fighter Guy On That One Planet*. The action makes this a good hour of TV. What makes it great is how it ends. After Roga escapes, he gets in touch with his people and they go for their end game, an all out attack on Cromwell and the rest of the government. Cromwell calls Picard, desperate for help, and Picard, troubled over the situation and maybe a little annoyed that Roga managed to turn the tables on the *Enterprise* so efficiently, takes an away team down to the planet to presumably help fight off Roga's assault. Data and Troi come with, and both ask Cromwell why more effort wasn't made to de-program the soldiers after the war. "We didn't think it would work" is the unconvincing, nervous response, one which fails to satisfy anyone. Roga's men break into the room, holding the city effectively hostage. Cromwell looks to Picard to bring the full weight of his ship, and of the Federation that backs that ship, to bear on the rebels.

And Picard says, essentially, "Thank you for your time, but oh, hey, look at the clock, we have to be going now." He leaves, giving the locals the choice between facing the consequences of their actions—or death. (Or both, really.)

It's a decision that's both perfectly in keeping with everything we know about Picard and about the dictates of the Prime Directive, and yet still manages to come as a complete shock. This isn't what good guys do, we've been taught; good guys defend the defenseless, even at the cost of their lives. But really, Cromwell and the others have no one to blame here but themselves. They created these monsters, and then they tried to cast the monsters aside, and that never works out well. Picard's role on the planet was to see if they were ready to enter the Federation. He informs them that, given their attitude towards Roga and the rest, they still have a ways to go, and assures them that once they find a way to resolve the situation, the rest of the galaxy would love to return their call. I fully expected that Cromwell would win in the end here, because short of joining the rebellion (which I couldn't imagine Picard doing, given his commitment to upholding the law), I couldn't see a way that would force the Angosian people to take care of their mistakes. That "Hunted" finds a solution to the problem that doesn't rely on cheating or giving us the obvious tragedy, is laudable. That the solution also manages to bring the action back home to Picard is flat out brilliant. The fact that it makes you feel like cheering isn't bad, either.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- "In your own words, this is not our affair." God, the willpower it must've taken not to snicker after that line.

"The High Ground"

Or The Once Which Was Banned In The UK

I have this British friend. (Hi, Dave!) I was talking with him on Skype over the weekend, and he's been keeping up with my TNG reviews, god only knows why. (Maybe Brits have a higher tolerance for typos and obscure references. I'm like the Monty Python of criticism over there.) He told me, "Oh, so one of the ones you're doing next week, it actually didn't air over here when I was a wee lad." (Dave speaks Brit, which really classes up the place.) And I was like, which one? And he was like, the one about the terrorists. And I was like, whoa.

So, not doubting my friend's word but realizing this was the Internet and any mistake I might make would kill at least a thousand adorable puppies, I looked "The High Ground" up on Wikipedia and there it was, plain as day: because it presents terrorism in a not entirely negative light, and because Data mentions "the reunification of Ireland in 2024," the episode didn't air along with the rest of season three in the UK. Figuring I might as well do some really thorough research, because this review was going to be late no matter what and you guys deserve that extra mile, I went back to my Google search and hit the link to the Memory Alpha entry on the episode. Not only did it confirm what my friend and Wikipedia had already told me, it also quoted some writers on the show (including the person who's name is on the episode, Melinda Snodgrass) as not really caring much for how the ep turned out. I didn't despise this one as I watched it, but it's definitely nowhere near the same level as "The Hunted," and that's a problem. It's a problem because, hey, we want our TV to be good TV, but it's even more a problem because when you're dealing with a subject this tricky and complex, you really need to bring your A game. "High Ground" is B-/C+ game, at best.

Welcome to Rutia IV. It's not a bad place, really, not yet a member of the Federation (weird how these two episodes seem to bookend each other), but still friendly enough for trade relations. "Ground" opens with *Enterprise* already in orbit around the planet, delivering medical supplies. See, friendly and generically futuristic thought it may look, Rutia has some problems; not everyone here is happy. A group of separatists is demanding to be allowed autonomy from the ruling power, and when the ruling power refuses to acknowledge them, the separatists have turned to bombing and assault. They're terrorists, now, and as Beverly sits sipping coffee in an outdoor cafe, a nearby building explodes. The good doctor rushes to provide aid to the fallen, despite Picard's orders to return to the ship, and while

her moral fortitude is impressive, her common sense isn't. Quick as it takes a terrorist sympathizer to see what she's doing and report back, a bad guy (or... is he?) teleports in, grabs Bev, and then teleports her away. The separatists have a hostage now, and we have ourselves a storyline.

Might as well get this out of the way first: I don't like hostage stories. I get why they come up as often as they do—it's a dramatic situation that's easy to convey, and it's also a plot hook with a very clear beginning, middle, and end. The character relationships are immediately established, and the set-up is a suspense generating machine. Except, really, it isn't, especially when you have a major character in an on-going series involved. There's never any danger that Beverly will be killed, and while that's to be expected (have we lost a major character since Tasha? Will we ever?), without even a pretend danger, we're left with a series of hoops we have to jump through before we can see anything resolved. Beverly will be rude to her captors, then the captor will slowly win her over to his side, and then Beverly will have some sort of moral dilemma, and eventually somebody from the *Enterprise* will show up and throw that dilemma into crisis. I just find this structure boring, because it's been done so many times, and because the strength of the situation—the way it's basically a pre-fab arc, with all the beats laid down before the writer even has to put pen to paper—is also its greatest weakness. It's like watching a new version of *A Christmas Carol*. You have to work overtime to make me care.

"Ground" is competent enough to avoid a place among the dregs of the first and second seasons. Let's not lose all perspective here; it's overly talky, and the debate at its core never rises above platitude-level, but everyone here is competent enough that we can get through everything without embarrassing ourselves. The final assault on the terrorist compound is reasonably exciting, and I did like the magical "dimensional teleportation device" the terrorists use to get from place to place. You had to have some way of preventing the *Enterprise* from simply tracking down the sort-of bad guys and taking them down, and inventing a weird work-around that's also slowly killing anyone who uses it is some pretty decent sci-fi jerry-rigging.

But this is a problematic episode, to be sure. The hostage situation is just a part of that. Beverly is supposed to be slowly won over by Kyril Finn (subtle, guys), the leader of the terrorists who speaks of killing, dresses like Lionel Richie, and draws like the comic in that Aha video. Whenever you get this kind of storyline, either the kidnapper is a psychotic, or else he's sympathetic enough to earn some trust from his captors. In order for this episode to have any ideological impact at all, Finn has to be the latter kind of kidnapper, but while he's not raving or anything, he's not exactly sane, either. The episode does an all right job in making sure we understand that Beverly is conflicted between what she's seeing and what she knows; my problem is, after hearing Finn's explanations and speeches, I don't really get why we're supposed to be on his side. It's clear he's willing to sacrifice everything for his cause, and it's clear he cares about his people, but there's no sense of why he thinks their struggle is so necessary. From what we see of Rutia IV, it doesn't look like that unpleasant a place—why the big objection to being part of it?

Maybe I'm being naive, or maybe I'm just betraying my natural tendency for group hugs, but in order for the debate at the heart of "Ground" to have any meaning, both sides need to have positions the audience can sympathize with. I don't see that here. Despite the various conversations about the effectiveness of terrorism, Finn himself comes across less as a good man driven to evil by an impossible situation, and more as an egotistical bastard who was just charismatic enough to convince a lot of other idiots to join him in the pointless destruction. On the other side of the coin, Alexana Devos, the Rutian police chief that Riker befriends, seems driven to extremes but still inherently decent. There's a lot of lofty debate about justified violence, but what this really boils down to is that a bad guy kidnaps somebody we like, and is eventually punished for it. We don't get to know anybody in Finn's camp beyond Finn (nor do we get to know anyone in Rutia beyond Devos), apart from Beverly's brief conversation with a boy; and that conversation is used for cheap drama at the end, when the same boy points a gun at Riker.

Whatever side of the line you fall on here, this is all a lot of heated talk that starts exciting (and I do give the episode some props for being willing to engage in this kind of discussion at all; for all our talk of freedom of speech, there's a curious vocal paralysis that falls over Americans when it comes to debating this sort of thing honestly. We're content to simply mouth the expected lines and move on, because it's dangerous to have real conversations, isn't it? Some sentences come with their own blast radii) but eventually collapses because it's all largely irrelevant to the plot. Unlike "The Hunted," no one in the main cast here is ever forced to make to a decision based on what they learn. Sure, Beverly has some sympathy towards Finn by the end, but who cares? It's not like she's ever going to betray Picard. (Really, the closest thing to emotional honesty in the episode probably comes from her nearly confessing her feelings for him.) We have connections to real life issues, and it's a little shocking (especially these days) to hear any heroic characters coming as close as these do to admitting that terrorism might not always be ineffective, but those connections never pay-off as they should. Instead, we just get a lot of very serious speeches about very serious issues, and occasional phaser fire.

Stripping away the politics, "Ground" has some exciting scenes. The terrorists assault on the *Enterprise* is well-done, giving a good example of just how much disruption such a group could cause if it was able to circumvent the ship's basic defenses. It also gives Geordi a chance to do some quick thinking and save the day. The science of the dimensional jumping is good enough idea that I kind of hope it comes up again (it's always good to have an established way to get around the *Enterprise's* high tech tracking systems), and I liked watching Wesley, Data, and Geordi working together again, however briefly. And hey, Finn's strategy—by kidnapping Beverly, he's forcing the Federation to acknowledge his cause—isn't terrible, and I like how our heroes are implicated by the lie of their apparent neutrality.

Really, though, I have to agree with the critics: this was a weighty topic handled in a sterile and unconvincing fashion. "Ground" did eventually air in the UK, and of course my friend has seen it by now, but I feel like the censorship actually makes the episode sound more compelling than it really is. When the end message is just, "We'd be better off if kids didn't pick up guns," it's hard to be too offended, but it's also hard to care.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- "History has shown us that strength may be useless when faced with terrorism." ...it has?
- "You should be drawing, not killing people." "I can do both." Well, maybe not at the same time, but sure.
- "You know what scares me the most, Finn? It scares me that you might win this fight and gain real power." And yet, when Picard arrives, Beverly tries to find some way to help Finn. I'm not sure that makes sense in a way that makes sense.
- When Finn beams onto the bridge, Picard immediately decks him. It's pretty sweet.
- Awfully convenient power outage, huh?
- Up next week, it's "Deja Q" and "A Matter Of Perspective"

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Deja Q"/"A Matter Of Perspective"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[9/16/10 10:40AM](#)

"Deja Q"

Or The One Where Pinocchio Laughs And Worf Considers The Dietary Value Of Good Literature

Human beings spend a lot of time standing around talking about what it's like being human, you ever notice that? It must be a function of consciousness; we have all these brains, and we're aware of all these brains, and that's just so *weird* and stuff. And there are feelings, too! Man, don't even get me started on feelings. In the face of all that sloppy passion and unchecked desire, the intellect responds in the only way it can: by cataloging, by dissection, by engaging in a study of why we're sad or happy or whatever. There's no one to compare us to, but sometimes I get the suspicion that that our race must look impossibly self-absorbed to any outside observer. Unless, that is, the observer is even more self-absorbed than we are.

Which brings us to Q, which brings us to the first episode of this week's double feature, "Deja Q." I don't think either of the eps I'm writing about today are classics, but "Deja" is definitely the better of the two—it's intermittently funny, deals with some major themes on the show, and comes perilously close to hitting the emotional marks it's aiming for. It doesn't entirely work. Some of the jokes fall flat, the themes we look at aren't explored in a way that's all that exciting, and the drama is undercut by a scene near the end that, while structurally inevitable, works mostly to undermine what we've seen so far. After our last Q ep, the brilliant "Q Who?", it's hard not to be a little disappointed to see the character rendered as impotent as he (mostly) is here—and I don't just mean because he's lost

his powers. But get past the high expectations, and there's fun to be had. I mean, Picard is tormented by a mariachi band. That is a thing of wonders.

I appreciate a good pun as much as the next guy (unless the next guy is Gallagher, in which case I'm probably in the wrong line), but I can't help thinking that "Deja" is ill-served by its title. Because this episode doesn't start out like a Q episode; it starts out with the *Enterprise* in orbit around Bre'el IV, working on a way to prevent that planet's asteroid moon from breaking orbit and crashing through the atmosphere. Such a crash could potentially throw Bre'el into its very own ice age, and as much as we all love mammoths that sound like Ray Romano and freaked out squirrels, that isn't a good thing. Tempting as it would be to just blow the moon to pieces (or perhaps call Bruce Willis, the best oil-rig guy in the world, to do the job), those pieces would do as much damage as the big rock would as is. Geordi suggests using the tractor beam to try and slow the descent; problem is, the *Enterprise's* tractor beam wouldn't be enough. So they're stuck.

That's when Q shows up on the bridge, naked and floating. One commercial break later, we find him dressed in one of the ship's boring-ass unitards, complaining about the color and claiming to've lost all his powers. Of course no one believes him, and they also assume he has something to do with the falling moon. Q protests, gets a little snippy, and eventually, Picard throws him in the brig. So now we have what the episode is really about: is Q fooling? And if he is fooling, what's his game? And if he isn't, just how can he possibly fit in as a normal person, after spending countless years pissing everyone off?

It's funny, I don't think I ever considered even for a second that Q was faking, and you get the impression that Picard's response is more based on irritation and an unwillingness to deal with the situation than anything approaching logic. After all, this kind of play doesn't seem like Q's style—he doesn't do humility, not even of the fake variety. It could get irritating that no one else on the ship seems to realize this, but it's not, mostly because the crew's reaction doesn't play as unbelief; it plays as antipathy. If Q was some respected, much loved figure on the ship, then his problems would be relevant. But he isn't, so they aren't. Plus, his timing is terrible. The whole moon thing would be stressful even under the best circumstances, and Q just adds in an unnecessary complication.

As for how he's lost his powers... That's one of the things about this episode I'm mixed on. I know there are stories down the road that make good use of the Continuum (I remember a pretty decent one on one *Voyager*, of all things), but here the concept seems poorly-defined. Normally, that's not a huge problem for me. When it comes to characters who are basically magic-based, I don't need a lot of specifics to make the story work; in fact, those characters work better when we don't question the "how" of what they're doing because we're too busy focusing on the "why." Still, we gotta have rules, right? "Deja" would be a great time to set down some of those rules, because if we're going to keep bringing Q back, at some point, we're going to need more of a sense of where he comes from than, "some place some where." Instead, all we're told is that Q lost his powers because his fellow Q weren't happy with the way he's been behaving.

That seems unimaginative to me. It seems like what you'd expect—because Picard and the others are so irritated by Q, of course his fellow god-like beings would be too. But it's too... easy somehow? Like, we're being told information we already know, and it reduces Q somehow by giving us an apparently moral force that can keep him in his place. But we don't know what drives this force's decisions, and when we finally meet another member of the continuum at the episode's climax, it's not exactly a satisfying experience. (That's the scene I was talking about above, by the way.) Corbin Bernsen overacts as much as de Lancie, only de Lancie knows how to modulate his haminess so that it's distinctive; Bernsen's performance is just this wave of smirking, self-satisfied smarm. This should be a triumphant moment, as our Q has decided he no longer wants to live as a human, and will sacrifice himself to an alien ship (the Calamarains, who apparently have good reason to dislike Q) to save the *Enterprise*. This selfless act wins him back his powers. It's an old story, but de Lancie manages to invest his decisions with

enough gravitas that it could've worked. Then Bernsen shows up. It's not just that he's hammy, it's that his performance is basically just a mediocre imitation of de Lancie's own—so if everybody in the continuum is so nutty, why did Q get booted out? I can almost make it fit in my head: that this is some dark joke, that while we're led to believe early on that Q is facing the consequences of his behavior, it really comes down to a bunch of crazed super-beings who follow a system of laws more for entertainment's sake than any actual morality. That, I could buy, because then Q's return to power would play as a gag, instead of as an indication that he's learned his lesson. But the scene is just too clumsy and misjudged for my interpretation to work, and it robs some power away from the episode's few moments of effective pathos.

Still, "Deja" can be effective, and that's largely based on the one brilliant choice: pairing the powerless Q off with Data. The Q/Picard relationship is one the show has gotten great mileage out of in the past, but with Q unable to torment the captain with anything beyond sarcasm and whininess, the power balance is wrong. It's hard to imagine him fitting very well with most of the other regular cast-members, either. Riker is too square-jawed, Worf would tear Q's head off ("What must I do to convince you people?" "Die." "Oh, very clever Worf. Eat any good books lately?"), Wesley is too much of a naive idiot, Troi would probably lecture him—and so on. Data is perfect because he never gets annoyed, never loses his patience, and because he takes everything Q says with such straight-forward seriousness that he forces Q to actually talk with him, as opposed to just delivering a monologue with pauses for the expected outraged responses.

There's also this line from Data: "An irony. It means that you have achieved in disgrace what I have always aspired to be." Q spends much of the episode complaining about the limitations of his human form, from back pain to hunger to the need for sleep. (I vaguely remember reading a story once about a creature who was forced to sleep after a lifetime of wakefulness. It's played for laughs here, but it would be a terrifying experience, wouldn't it? "Okay, for eight hours, you'll pretend to be dead, and you might hallucinate.") It wears thin, because it's one of those surface-level gags that falls apart when you think about it. Humans aren't the only sentient beings that eat or sleep or suffer, and surely, in all his time as a sub-space Loki, Q would've noticed these things happening even if they weren't happening to him. I can buy that he's self-absorbed, but he's never been portrayed as an idiot, and he's supposedly still in enough command of his mental faculties to help Geordi figure out a way to stop the moon. But I'm getting off-track; pairing Data with Q is the only plausible way to have Q learn some humility, because Data values everything that Q hates, in a way that's steadfast, sincere, and unforced.

What disappoints me the most about this episode is that its basic ideas are so cool (what *would* it be like to lose omnipotence?), but so much of the scripting is shallow or under-explored. I mostly buy Q's decision to sacrifice himself at the end, and I think it's not unreasonable that Data's sacrifice helps push him to that point (it doesn't hurt that Q's is driven as much by his unwillingness to stay mortal as anything more noble), but I do feel like we're missing a scene in here. The falling moon isn't a terrible plot device, but it also works as a distraction, preventing the main storyline from ever getting much past surface impressions. The ending is nice, though. Q, for the moment chastised, saves Bre'el IV, and gives Data the perfect gift: one great big belly laugh. Brent Spiner is, as ever, more than a little creepy when trying to convey human emotion, but it's still a great send-off, and leaves me with a better impression than the episode, perhaps, deserves.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Another line that could've been in a much more interesting episode: "Because in all the universe, you're the closest thing I have to a friend, Jean-Luc." Stuff like that really does make me want to know more about Q, even if it does rob him of some of his impact.

- I always get suspicious when people insist on telling on me something is great, which is maybe why I always get bored when the show goes on one of its, "It is so freaking cool to be human!" tangents. Q's biological sufferings could've made for a nice deflation of that conceit, but they weren't, really; he just whined about a lot of goofy, easily solved concerns.
- I did like Guinan taking Q down, though. Do we ever find out the specific history between them on this show?
- Hey, I could change the gravitational constant of the universe. If I really wanted to.
- "Data, why are you laughing?" "It... I do not know. But it was... a wonderful feeling."

"A Matter Of Perspective"

Or The One Where He Said, She Said, And Things Go Boom

Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* is an amazing film. I've been sitting here for fifteen minutes trying to figure out a way to explain it to you in a few sentences, but I can't. It's not that complex, apart from its structure: a man is murdered in the forest, and the three witnesses to the crime, the bandit, the wronged (?) woman, and the murdered man (his ghost is called back for the trial—and pardon the brief digression, but that always struck me as the most nihilistic gesture in an incredibly cynical movie; that the dead could speak, and they'd still lie as bad as the living, is horrifying), tell a court their version of the crime. Each version varies wildly, and even after hearing all testimony, it's impossible to know exactly what happened. That's the heart of things, right there, that swirling mystery of the past, and what makes the film so unsettling is that it never gives you the "real" account. It never settles your mind by treating you, the audience, to the truth. You can watch *Rashomon* like a puzzle waiting to be solved, but you'll never find an answer that satisfies you, because there isn't one.

Countless television shows have homaged (or stolen) this format, but hardly any of them remember that the whole point of *Rashomon* is that none of the stories we hear are any more true than any of the other stories. Everyone has something to gain or hide or protect, even if they aren't consciously aware of it, and that need trumps their abilities as objective observers. The rip-offs always have to give us a cheat sheet by the end. It's always easy to watch each fake version and realize what makes it fake, because the fakeness always stems from one of the narrator's obvious flaws. Like, the guy with the huge ego will give an account where everyone worships him. It flatters the viewer that even though these imperfect characters can't really see what's going on, *we* can, because we're quite clever, and because ultimately, buried under all those exaggerations, there is one core Truth that only we can figure out completely. It makes *Rashomon* safe, in a way the film was never intended to be.

Another way to make the *Rashomon* story "safe" is by including a main character as one of the narrators, like Riker in "A Matter Of Perspective." The *Enterprise* is visiting a space station to check in on the research of Dr. Nel Apgar. Riker beams over to the station, along with Geordi, but Geordi beams back first the next day, and tells Picard that there's some kind of unpleasantness going on between Riker and the doctor. Then Riker beams back, but as he leaves the station, the place explodes, and O'Brian is just barely able to get Will's pattern on the transporter beam. No one knows what caused the explosion, and soon after, a Tanugan official, Chief Inspector Krag, arrives on the ship, wanting to arrest Riker on suspicion of murder. Given that Federation law puts the *Enterprise* liable to the laws of the planet below them, Picard has negotiate a deal in which, via sworn testimony and voice logs, they can use the holodeck to find out what happened on the space station, and whether or not there's sufficient evidence to send Riker below.

Already there's a problem with this: Riker is innocent. Everyone may put on their serious faces, Krag may be a complete dick about the whole thing (it's funny how guys in that kind of role are *always* dicks), and the episode may try and play coy about just what happened on the space station, but there isn't a chance in hell that the *Enterprise's*

first officer murdered that scientist. That's just not the kind of show this is—all the leads have very clear, very powerful moral codes, and while there are circumstances that could theoretically drive them to bend those morals, I can't imagine any situation that would require outright breakage. "Matter" makes a few plays towards throwing suspicion on Riker in the beginning, first by having his final scene with Apgar played off screen, then by holding back his account of events till after the holodeck simulation is set up, and while it's effective enough in making us want to find out what happened, it also seems a little cheap. If you've been playing along at home, you might remember "A Wolf In The Fold," an episode from the original *Trek* that had Scotty accused of a murder he didn't commit. That episode also tried to play around with ambiguity, and once again, it doesn't really work; and let's be honest, it's much easier to imagine Scotty as a killer than it is to imagine Riker. (Although Frakes is so laid back all the time, you kind of wonder how he relieves his stress, especially when he doesn't have his dad around to re-enact episodes of *American Gladiator*.)

"Matter" doesn't go deliriously off the rails in the final act like "Wolf" did (we don't find the space station was destroyed by the reincarnated spirit of Guy Fawkes), which is both a relief and something of a shame. The explanation we get for Apgar's death is clever, science-based, and fits the established facts. It also conveniently exonerates Riker, which, while expected, makes the earlier uncertainty even more pointless. But it does make sense, and it doesn't feel like a cheat, which counts for a lot. Plus, you could argue that whatever suspense the episode is shooting for is generated not from trying to make us doubt one of the show's leading men, but in worrying about whether or not that man will be sent down to the planet, where he'll almost certainly be imprisoned or, worse, executed. Krag explains to Picard that, on Tanuga, the accused are guilty until proven innocent, which doesn't speak well to Riker's chances in a Tanugan court. (It doesn't speak well to *anyone's* chances, honestly. Proving a negative is nearly impossible.) Geordi is able to prove that Apgar is basically responsible for his own demise, killed in an attempt to kill Riker, which means that not only is the Beard One in the clear, the dead guy was a whiny bastard who deserved what he got. No reason for caution, everyone: we are entering a Tragedy Free Zone.

Even before we get to the decent but toothless ending, "Matter" is a mixed bag. Much like "Deja Q," we've got a lot of potentially interesting ideas (the Federation's relationship with working scientists, middle-aged aliens hitting on Riker) which aren't handled all that successfully, and sadly, there's no goofy performances or core of solid emotion to help smooth over the rough patches. Once the episode gets down to its *Rashomon*-ing, there's some interest to be found in matching up the various versions (we hear from Riker, Apgar's wife, Manua, and Apgar's lab assistant), and seeing how they contrast, but that only goes so far. Again, it comes down to the problem of Riker being a major cast member. While it's possible he exaggerates Apgar's wife's amorous advances, nothing we've seen of him so far on the show indicates that he's so arrogant or insecure that he'd have to imagine aggressive attraction when there is none. Besides, Manua's version of events requires Riker to be such a leering, one-note villain that'd it be difficult to take seriously even if we had every reason to believe her. (That said, the best laughs in the episode come from comparing the three versions of the Riker/Apgar fistfight: Riker's, which has Apgar throwing the first punch, Manua's, which has Apgar getting beat down for no good reason, and Apgar's own version, relayed to his assistant, which has Apgar kicking Riker's ass.)

All of this would've been better served by putting a guest actor in the Riker role here, pulling some formerly anonymous crew-member out of the *Enterprise's* halls and making him the suspect. If it was somebody we didn't already know, we'd have more reason to wonder just what actually happened, more reason to doubt the crew-member's story, and more reason to watch all the other versions of the tale that play out here. I'm not sure why we didn't get this. It might be a budget thing, or it might be that they wanted to do another Riker-centered episode, or maybe they chose to put the unabashedly heroic Riker on the stand because even the hint that someone on the *Enterprise* might be capable of murder would tarnish the show's Up With People image. Whatever the reason, it seems like a missed opportunity.

We got what we got, though, and credit where it's due: "Matter" goes to a great deal of effort in the final act to make every version of the story we'd seen relevant to the final reveal, as Picard uses threads from each as evidence in his accusations against Apgar. It's a smart piece of writing that I can respect without really enjoying all that much. The episode makes a few stabs towards the original movie's despair. At one point during Manua's account of events, Riker becomes so frustrated by what he's seeing that he interrupts the re-enactment, insisting that none of what they're being shown actually happened. Later, he insists to Troi that he's telling the truth, and she tells him she believes him, but that she senses no falseness from Manua, either. And since the real villain here is Apgar himself, none of the other characters had reason to consciously lie, which means the fact that Riker and Manua's stories don't match up is an example, however unsophisticated, of how no one remembers the same past.

Only, this is the future, where there's high tech machinery, computers, and a million different ways for bringing that past back to life. That should make this all the more poignant; even with all that technology, the truth remains elusive. Instead, all doubt is swept away in Picard's final speech (and let's be honest, if you have to have someone sweep away doubt, you could go worse than Picard), and the discrepancies between Riker and Manua's memories are rendered irrelevant. *Rashomon* is a deeply unsettling film that questions our basic understanding of reality, and only provides some minor comfort in the final moments by showing that however uncertain the world is, human connections still matter. "Perspective" is a decent mystery that ties everything up nicely, with only some minor uncertainty left over. Each represent their own version of the truth—but in this case, it's pretty easy to figure out which one is worth remembering.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- Forget to mention, there's a funny scene at the beginning when Data finds Picard painting, and is unable to hide his low opinion of Picard's work. It plays somewhat into the "eye of the beholder" theme of the rest of the episode (especially since there are three people painting the model, all producing different results), but it's mostly just for fun.
- Next week, it's that "Yesterday's Enterprise" all of you keep going on about, followed by "The Offspring."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Yesterday's Enterprise"/"The Offspring"



[Zack Handlen](#)
[9/23/10 10:00AM](#)

"Yesterday's Enterprise"

Or The One Where Tasha Gets What She Deserves

What if something was wrong? I don't mean a broken heart or a lost shoelace. I mean something major, something so big that it's impossible to step back and look at the big picture because anywhere you step, you're still buried inside the mess. So you just feel it, the way a great conductor can tell if a single instrument in the orchestra is off-key. You can't eat, because you can't get the oily sick taste of wrongness off your tongue, and it's impossible to form lasting emotional connections because everyone you talk to is as wrong as everything else; misplaced, out of step, on loan from the Island of Misfit Realities. Then one day, you figure it out—you realize what's been causing all the problems. Once you fix the cause, you can right all the wrongness, and the universe will be set back on its proper course. Everyone can go home.

Everyone except you. Because as it turns out, you're supposed to be dead.

I had high hopes for "Yesterday's Enterprise." I've heard it praised often enough, and, given the title and the few facts I knew about the episode, I knew I was in for some alternate reality fun. I live for that stuff. There's time travel here, paradoxes, anomalies, great action sequences, sterling performances. And Tasha Yar. I was expecting all kinds of goodness from this, but what I wasn't expecting is for the series to somehow find a way to absolve itself of its most ignoble sin: the pointless death of a main character from the first season. "Skin of Evil" is an awful hour of television no matter how you slice it, and Yar's death scene in it is an insulting end for someone who was just

beginning to come into her own. That happens sometimes. Shows, especially long running ones, can hit rough patches, and, unlike with the rough draft of a novel, they can't go back and edit out a bit because they realize it doesn't work. And yet, that's basically what "Yesterday's Enterprise" does. It works beautifully. Even at her best, Tasha was a problematic character, but by the end of this episode, it's impossible not to feel her loss.

Emotional aspects aside (and, of course, I'll get back to those in a second, because I am a soppy son of a bitch), "Yesterday's" is a wonderfully efficient piece of science fiction storytelling. The teleplay (written by what looks like half the show's writing staff) wastes no time at all in getting down to business. The *Enterprise* comes across a time displacement floating in space. While Data struggles to get a reading on it, and Picard debates the best course of action, a ship comes through the rift. Before anyone can figure out what's happening, the universe—*shifts*. I'll admit, I misread this when it happened; I was assuming that the ship coming out of the rift, which looked like the *Enterprise*, had the alternate reality versions of Picard and everyone else aboard. I thought the rift wasn't a break in time but a gateway to another dimension, sort of a "Mirror, Mirror" deal.

The situation a good deal more clever than that, though, as the episode soon makes clear. The rift *is* a time warp, and the ship that comes through it is actually the *Enterprise-C*, the previous model of our *Enterprise* that was destroyed over twenty years ago. The shift on our *Enterprise*, the shift that changes the bridge design, uniforms, and puts Tasha back in command of security, is actually a result of the *Enterprise-C* leaving its own time period, changing the past, and creating a new present. It's a complicated concept. While time travel stories have been playing this kind of spin since Ray Bradbury's "A Sound Of Thunder," this is a lot of information that needs to be unpacked quickly, in order to set up the conflict that will drive the rest of the episode.

What's impressive, then, is how much "Yesterday's" manages to convey without ever becoming belabored. The episode does a terrific job of laying down its basic concepts in an efficient, easy to follow way. In addition to the dialog (which is often expository but never tediously so), there are all kinds of brilliant touches to show just how screwed up this world is. This Other *Enterprise* is severely over-crowded, and you hear a steady stream of announcements playing over the ships intercom about combat training. The Captain's Log is now the "Military Log." Guinan's outfit changes color. (Okay, that last one probably doesn't count for much.) Even some of the performances have changed. Stewart's Other Picard is harsher, angrier, honed to a furious point by years of ceaseless conflict, and he and Riker don't have the comfortable camaraderie that their regular counterparts share. And there's no Troi on the bridge or, indeed, anywhere that we ever see. It isn't mentioned, but her absence tells as all we need to know about the change in the *Enterprise's* on-going mission; nobody gives a damn about feelings anymore.

Another point in the episode's favor is how quickly it comes to its main crisis—what to do with the *Enterprise-C* and her crew. As soon as the shift between potentialities occurs, Guinan knows something is wrong. She tells Picard that the *Enterprise-C* will have to return to its own time, that it's their presence in the future (and absence in the past) that caused the twenty year war with the Klingon Empire that's already cost millions upon millions of lives. Picard objects to this, but he doesn't waste too much time on these objections. It's very easy to imagine "Yesterday's" spent with Guinan struggling to sway the minds of an increasingly irritated crew, of her having to sneak around and find others who also somehow sense what she senses, of their brave efforts to set right what once went wrong. But that's not what this episode is about. Sure, Riker isn't happy; the idea of sacrificing a whole crew on someone's hunch doesn't go down easy, so somebody has to speak up. Riker's unhappiness doesn't stand in the way of what needs to get done, however.

All the clever writing here is much appreciated, and there's an elegance to it that you don't always see on genre shows. For example: note how Other Data explains how the death of the *Enterprise-C* in the past could've prevented the Klingon War. We know the ship isn't going to survive in the past for long, so we need a clear reason why its sacrifice will be enough to right history back on course. By having Other Data present a possible theory, we're saved

the wasting time at the end of the episode—without his explanation, one of the "real" members of the *Enterprise* crew would've had to say something like, "Gosh, remember how the deaths of everyone aboard the previous model of this ship twenty years ago stopped a war?" It would've been a clunky piece of housekeeping that distracted from the episode's emotional denouement. Even if all "Yesterday's" had was smart, risky plotting, it would stand as a series highpoint. But we go one step further here, with Yar's brief return to the bridge.

Denise Crosby isn't an amazing actress, but she's better directed here than she ever was in the first season, and she's given far, far better dialog. Her relationship with Lt. Richard Castillo (Christopher McDonald), a crew-member aboard the *Enterprise-C*, is one of the stronger romances we've seen on the show, without any of the smarmy aggression that's bogged down similar plotlines in the past. Really, though, it comes down to Yar's conversation with Guinan in Ten-Forward, and her final exchange with Picard. It's not enough that Guinan tells Yar she's supposed to be dead—Guinan goes so far as to tell Tasha that her death was "empty" and "without purpose." It's a terrific acknowledgement of one of the series' worst moments, and provides the episode with its strongest emotional beats. Tasha's determination to die with meaning by the end of "Yesterday's" transforms her from a misstep into something more noble and sad. Characters die all the time in stories, and sometimes we care, and sometimes we don't, but here's one who knows that she's doomed, who knows that in order for the story to be told properly, she has to leave. It's not really a sacrifice, since whatever happens, she's dead. But at least this way gives her back her dignity.

So yeah, this is brilliant. The space battle at the end is appropriately thrilling (alternate timelines are a great excuse to kill off leading character consequence free; in that spirit, please enjoy Riker's gaping neck wound), and the story flows from beginning to end with an amazing amount of confidence and grace. The best testament to quality I can give here is that, when Guinan sits down with Geordi in the final scene and says, "Tell me about Tasha Yar," I wanted to hear more.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- Given that the Federation is getting its ass kicked by the Klingon Empire in the alternate timeline, it's understandable that Worf wouldn't be on the Other *Enterprise*. But at least we get that opening scene between him and Guinan. "It's an Earth drink. Prune juice." "A warrior's drink." Followed by an in-depth discussion of why Worf doesn't date.
- Is Garrett the first female captain we've seen? I can't remember.

"The Offspring"

Or *The One Where It's A Girl*

What a horrid title. It sounds like the name of some miserable, grimy *Omen* knock-off from the late '70s: "Terror is heir apparent in *The Offspring*!" ("The Child" might've fit better, but we already had an episode with that name, and it sucked.) It's easy enough to imagine "The Offspring" as a horror flick without changing that many of the plot details, and if this were a different kind of show, this episode might've been played for scares. A sentient robot builds a child. The government wants to take that child away from the robot, possibly for military purposes. The sentient robot objects. The child refuses to leave, and then it suffers a psychotic break. The third act would've been the killing spree, plus maybe a lightning storm. And lasers!

Since we're talking about an episode of *TNG*, though and not something from *The Outer Limits*, it should come as no surprise that "Offspring" goes in a different direction. Data builds himself a kid, but instead of terrifying the audience with the dark implications of android self-replication, the ep focuses instead on what it's like to be a parent, and the difficulties in raising a child who perform millions of complex mental calculations in an instant, but can't tell

the difference between kissing and biting. (Admittedly, some relationships make this more challenging than others.) And yeah, a representative from Starfleet shows up and starts acting like a creep, and yeah, the child is caught in the middle, and malfunctions. But the malfunction doesn't turn her into a murder machine. Someone ends up dead at the end, but it's far from horrific.

In many ways, "Offspring" is as a sequel or companion piece to season 2's "The Measure Of A Man." Once again, we have Data's status as a full citizen of the Federation called into question, and once again we're faced with bureaucratic unwillingness to see Data as anything but a potentially invaluable machine. Once again, all this oppression is represented by a single guy: here, it's Admiral Haftel, played by character actor and *Santa Barbara* staple, Nicolas Coster. Coster manages to make the role, if not sympathetic, at least believable, and Picard gets his usual good shots in defending Data from the mean people who want to steal his kid. I don't think I'll ever get tired of watching Data calmly standing up for himself, either. It makes a terrific contrast against Stewart's intensity—neither overplay their hands, but both represent different approaches to aggression, and watching Spiner even-handedly making his point after Stewart speechifies strengthens both performances.

Yet there's a certain ring of familiarity to all this. The implacability of government machinations, the way institutions can grind the individual to dust by the sheer inertia of their assumptions—okay, that's always going to be an important theme in fiction, so long as we have people who get together in big groups and do stupid things. More to the point is that we've seen this specific conflict before. In "Man," Maddox argued that Data was the property of Starfleet; he wasn't alive, which meant he didn't have rights, and it was for the good of everyone if he was simply viewed as a very powerful tool. Picard defeated this argument handily, so it loses some of its impact when it's used again here. Oh, no one is saying Data is property anymore, but Haftel argues that Lal, Data's daughter, should be placed in other hands because of her singularity and her potential. Boil away the pretty words, and the theme is the same: Lal is a machine, and machines don't have the same rights as a biological child.

These scenes remain dramatically effective, but they aren't as interesting as Data and Lal's interactions, and Lal's attempts to follow in her father's footsteps by becoming more human. "Offspring" starts on the right note by opening with Data introducing his daughter to Geordi, Wesley, and Troi. The episode could've spent the first scenes exploring what inspired Data to procreate, and then going through the difficulties of acting on that inspiration, but this is a much more interesting approach. The nuts-and-bolts of how Lal came to be are largely unimportant, and what we need to know about them, and about what's driving Data, can all be conveyed after the fact. Lal's initial form is alien, unsettling in appearance despite Data's pride. Data explains that he made the child initially sexless because he wished to give it the opportunity to select its own gender, but that strange, not-really-anything body doesn't shy away with how odd all this is. Picard's utter shock when he learns what has happened is logically unmotivated (as Data and Troi both point out), but it also comes from some deep, irrational part of the brain that isn't comfortable with new species popping up out of nowhere.

Once Lal chooses to be a young woman, Data sets to work showing her around the ship, and trying to satisfy her endless curiosity. This can get a little corny. Lal starts working in Ten-Forward to study human interaction more closely, and her and Guinan's conversation about flirting is on the twee side, although the pay-off, with Lal grabbing a just-returned Riker and kissing him, is funny enough. (I don't buy Guinan dodging the sex question, though. It plays more like a sitcom joke than a character decision.) Besides, these sequences mostly work because they deal thoughtfully with all the potential problems that could arise from trying to integrate a new android into even such a welcoming small society as the Enterprise. Troi convinces Data that he should enroll Lal in school, but when he tries, she's incapable of fitting in; she doesn't understand human interaction enough to function with teenagers, and young children are terrified of her because she's different. While Data's request that he be treated like any other parent is justified, that doesn't mean that his child can be treated like any other child.

Given the nature of *TNG*—light continuity, but generally avoiding significant changes that would require cast changes or additions for more than an episode or two—it's no surprise that Lal doesn't last on the Enterprise forever. I suppose it's possible that Data and Haftel could've arrived at some kind of compromise, though, so it is a surprise when Lal dies. Her death is softened when Data downloads all her programs into his own brain, but that still doesn't eliminate the loss, especially considering how she dies. Haftel's refusal to acknowledge her wishes leads to Lal experiencing an actual emotional response; and since she doesn't have the equipment to process such an experience, she shuts down. Data's progeny had achieved in a few days what he'd spent his entire lifetime reaching for, and it kills her.

TNG has never been afraid of melodrama, and "Offspring" does go overboard on a few occasions. Most problematic is Hallie Todd's performance as Lal. The actress tries, but can't convincingly match Brent Spiner's ethereal calm. It made me appreciate Spiner's work more (he's able to get a surprising amount of drama without ever changing his vocal tone), but it also diminishes Todd's arc from clumsy toddler to tormented heroine. The episode works, though, because it doesn't exploit Data's latest attempt to become more human either for horror or easy jokes. (We get a few gags at the expense of Lal's naiveté, but they're never mean spirited.) Lal lives just long enough to surpass her father, and in doing so, enriches his life forever. Positronic brains or not, I'm sure there are human parents who could relate.

Grade: A-

Stray Observations:

- Riker's absence for most of the episode has an easy enough explanation; "The Offspring" is Jonathan Frakes' directorial debut.
- Gah, the score! Never have I have been forced to endure so many sobbing violins.
- Troi is really well-used in this episode. See? I *can* say nice things.
- "Commander, what are your intentions to my daughter?"
- "I love you, Father." "I wish I could it feel it with you." "I will feel it for both of us. Thank you for my life." See, "The Child"? That's how you do a damn death scene.

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Sins of the Father"/"Allegiance"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[9/30/10 10:00AM](#)

"Sins of the Father"

Or The One Where The Klingon Empire Turns Its Back On Worf

World-building is as much about illusion as it is about information. No fictional creation can ever have as much detail as reality, no matter how many episodes a show runs, or how many novels fans write about it, so the idea is to suggest worlds without ever having to show them. The *Enterprise* is just a collection of rooms, but it has to feel like a ship; some of the ensemble characters may only get a handful of lines each episode, but there has to be the sense that, were they to talk longer, they'd have stories to tell. On the best shows, any character can step forward and take center stage without losing our interest, because even if all we know of them is some tics and a few punchlines, we still believe there's more to learn.

I love *TNG*, but I don't think it's a great show; it's more a very good show with a share of amazing individual episodes. In terms of world-building, it can be hit-or-miss; it's not that I doubt that, say, Troi has a past, it's that I have zero interest in hearing about it. (All right, that's not entirely fair. I would be as happy as the next guy with a terrific Troi-centric storyline. I'm just not holding my breath that we'll ever get one.) I think we've all had enough Wesley-centric episodes to last us a very long time. But everybody else I'm still curious about. I wouldn't mind finding out about Riker's earlier days, or learning what's going on with Picard and Beverly. While "Sins of the Father" isn't a flashback episode, it does give us more information about one of the show's most unsung (and best) secondary leads. In doing so, "Father" helps expand the *TNG* universe, and gives Worf his moment of glory. It's another strong episode in what is turning into a consistently solid season.

Speaking of Riker, remember "Matter Of Honor"? It's from back in the second season—as part of an officer exchange program, Riker spends some time as first officer of the Klingon ship, *Pagh*. He makes friends, flirts with Klingon women, and wins the respect of his crewmates. One of the pleasures of watching *TNG* from the beginning is the show's occasional references to earlier episodes; they're smooth enough that, if you haven't seen the episode being referenced, you won't realize you're missing out, but if you've been paying attention, it helps maintain the feeling that this is a persistent world. That happens here: "Sins" begins with the *Enterprise* taking on a Klingon officer named Kurn to serve as the ship's First Officer, as the second part of "Honor"'s exchange program. The writers (Ron Moore, W. Reed Moran, and Drew Deigna) could've justified Kurn's presence in any number of ways, but they remind us of the *Pagh* and Riker's time there, partly for continuity, and partly because "Honor" was all about, well, honor, and that's going to be a very important thread here.

Kurn is played by Tony Todd, who does a great job of balancing his usual menacing presence with a sense of desperation and even, oddly enough, vulnerability. As First Officer, he runs roughshod over the crew, barking orders, berating everyone for their lax discipline (I've gotten used to Wesley by now, but I can't say I wasn't happy to see him yelled at), and ignoring Riker's attempts at advice. This, initially, looks to be our main plot: Kurn's difficult, a crisis arises, Kurn learns to adjust his methods, and the ensemble learns that maybe discipline isn't such a bad thing after all. Oh, and of course Kurn will spend some time tormenting Worf, because that's what Klingons do: torment each other. Only, that's not what happens. Kurn pushes Worf, until Worf is finally upset enough to confront Kurn in his quarters. After determining once and for all that Worf isn't anyone's pet, Kurn explains the truth: he is Worf's younger brother, and he's here to ask for Worf's help. Someone has put up treason charges against their father, Mogh, and Worf, as the eldest (and only publicly acknowledged son of Mogh), is the only one who can restore the family reputation.

It's time, then, for a field trip to the First City of the Klingon Empire, because it's not like Picard's going to let Worf go off on his own. The First City is remarkable, all thunder and storm clouds and buildings that look as if they could be used as weapons, should the need arise. The Klingons make fascinating characters (when well written) because they used to be the bad guys. Traditionally, the aggressive, war-like races on a sci-fi show are the villains. This is because of story demands—heroes are the guys who try and stop places from being conquered, not the ones who do the conquering. (Plus, it makes us human look better if we're not the only ones killing the Indians, so to speak.) Here, peace has been made, but the decor remains the same; there's no attempt made to friendly up Klingon hospitality, and while we learn by the end of the episode that politics on the home-world are trickier than they initially appear, we're never given cause to believe anything here will change.

The second half of "Father" is a curious sort of courtroom drama; while Worf stands his ground against the insults of Duras, the son of Mogh's greatest rival, Picard and the *Enterprise* Mystery Team go to work trying to prove Mogh's innocence. Picard's unquestioning support of Worf serves to make both characters more likable (Picard for putting his trust and respect in Worf, Worf for earning the trust and respect of a man like Picard), and Stewart's performance during the Klingon council is unsurprisingly excellent; he can't make himself a Klingon, but he can surely do his damn best to behave like one. His commitment is tested when Kurn, who's been serving as Worf's *cha'DIch* during the trial (we never see anyone engage in actual combat during the proceedings, but from what Worf says, if anybody's going to fight, it would be the *cha'DIch*), is injured by a trio of assassins working for Duras. Worf asks Picard to take Kurn's place, which gives even Picard a moment's pause, because hey, he's not getting younger (and his skin is not getting any more knife-proof). But he accepts, and when the assassins come for him, he makes a surprisingly good showing. There's a long held myth in *Trek* fandom that Kirk was the bad-ass, and Picard was the thinker. While it's true that Kirk had more of a rough and ready approach than Picard, it's important to remember that both characters were more than simple archetypes. Kirk could think his way out of most anything, and Picard, despite being a man of more distinguished years, is no slouch in the ass-kicking department.

In council, the long dead Mogh is accused of colluding with the Romulans; his treason made the Romulans attack on the Khitomer Outpost (the attack that killed Mogh and left Worf an orphan) possible. It goes without saying that Mogh is, of course, innocent. Ron Moore's name on the credits or not, we're not in the murky gray morality of *Battlestar Galactica* quite yet, so it's probably asking too much to force Worf and his newfound brother to accept that just because their father was a son of a bitch, doesn't mean they have to be. I'm not sure *TNG* could've supported that kind of twist, anyway; we've been told again and again how important Worf's honor is to him, and a storyline that stripped that honor away in a manner that left him no recourse could've sent the character into a tailspin that would require more than a single episode to come out of. Thankfully, it's a little more complicated than that. One of the assumptions when Picard sets Data, Geordi, and Riker to looking for answers is that there will be answers to find, and "Father" gains a lot of points out of proving that assumption false. Oh sure, Geordi is able to determine that the logs damning Worf's father are probably faked, but there's no definitive evidence. When Picard goes to meet the other survivor of Khitomer, Kahlest, she agrees with him that Mogh was innocent, but she has no knowledge that can prove that innocence in court. Picard uncovers the truth by bluffing, bringing Kahlest to the council and pretending she has information in order to draw out the conspirators; it's a dramatic choice that helps underplay the convenience of Mogh's innocence.

Even better is what happens next. It's not really a surprise when we learn that it was Duras's father who contacted the Romulans, nor is it a major shock when K'mpec, the head of the council, reveals he was in on the frame-up. Duras is flat-out bad-guy material (three on one? Mocking Picard? Total jerkface), and K'mpec's warning to Worf earlier was an obvious sign that something was up. What is surprising is that this isn't some cruel attempt to trap Worf, but the end result of some behind the scenes negotiations to keep the Klingon Empire from collapsing. If the true traitor is revealed, we're told, the Empire will fall to civil war. Picard is outraged, demanding that the truth must out regardless of the consequences, but Worf demurs.

Much of the latter part of "Father" is focused on Picard and the others' attempts to figure out what really happened back at Khitomer. Once he accepts his role and makes his claim to the council, Worf is sidelined from the action. We don't even get a scene of him beating the crap out of Duras's henchmen. Picard's bluff reveals the secret, but these are Worf's people, and in the end, this story belongs to him. It's his honor that's in question, and the choice he makes, to sacrifice face in the Empire in order to save that Empire from devouring itself alive, makes up for his time on the bench. It's a decision that's consistent with everything we've seen of his character so far, but one that also serves to clarify our understanding of him. This is a being who has spent his entire existence aspiring to be part of the home he lost as a child, and here, he willingly sacrifices another tie to that home because it is the honorable thing to do. In the final scene, the members of the Klingon council turn their backs on Worf. Kurn resists, and Worf says, "You must also, brother." It's a remarkable moment, and no matter how or how little we see of Worf in the episodes to come, it will prove difficult to forget.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- "I shall try some of your burned, replicated bird meat." Klingons make delightful Thanksgiving dinner guests.
- Picard is very willing to put up with Kurn's intensity on the bridge. Makes you wonder if he doesn't get a kick out of somebody else doing the yelling for a change.
- "It's a good day to die, Duras. And the day is not over yet."
- "It is good to see you again." "You are still fat, K'mpec."

"Allegiance"

Or The One Where Picard Makes New Friends, And Beverly Dances

Well, well, well, doesn't this sound familiar: an unknown alien force kidnaps Captain Picard from his quarters, depositing him in a cell with three companions. The cell is locked, and anyone who tries to tamper with the lock mechanism is hit with beam of pure pain. No one in the cell seems to know who brought them there, or why, and it's up to the four of them working together to discover what's happened, and to find some means of escape. The cell is small, the furnishing's spartan, and Picard's cell-mates are broad types: Tholl, the arrogant thinker who uses logic to hide his cowardice; and Esoqq, the violent warrior who wants to stab things and is very, very hungry. There's also Mitena Haro, a first year Starfleet cadet who's a huge fan of Picard's. She's a little more complex than the other two, maybe sort of a bridge between their outlooks... or maybe something more than that.

Oh, right, these are reviews, aren't they. She's the alien kidnapper in disguise! Moving on.

The details are different, but doesn't this sound a lot like something that we would've seen during the original series? I could imagine it fitting in (as well as anything did) in *TNG*'s first season, back when the show was struggling both to carry on the Trek legacy and find its own way, but it's a testament to how far the show has come that "Allegiance" doesn't entirely fit. As *TNG* has gone on, it's deepened its storytelling; where the original series was focused on broad stroke and archetypes, *TNG* is more about the complex societies and interactions that make up a functioning, universe-spanning governance. It can still make effective episodes out of standalone stories, like "The Survivor," but it's more difficult to swallow a scenario like "Allegiance"'s because it's easier to spot the laziness. Picard's kidnappers aren't precisely godlike, but they share the Godlike Beings' affinity for disruption without consequence. The ending does something to correct this, and there's enough to enjoy here to keep the ep from being a slog, but it remains a kind of plot the series can do without.

Of course, now that I've dismissed it, there's all this empty space left to fill. So what the hey, let's unpack this. Picard gets kidnapped (and how suave is our captain, lounging in his quarters with a glass of, I'm assuming, wine and a good book), but Riker and the others on the *Enterprise* don't realize it, because the aliens thoughtfully leave a duplicate of Picard in his place. It's not a bad stinger, and given that the aliens running the show here are interesting in studying the effects of authority and leadership, it makes sense that the duplicate Picard is as much a part of their experiment as the real one. Structurally, though, it's odd. The big hook of the episode is what's going with the real Picard in that little room. No matter how well done Fake Picard's scenes are (and they're not bad), he's in a familiar setting, and we already know basically what's going on, even if we don't know the reasons behind it. And yet the episode seems to spend as much time with the Fake Picard as with the real one, maybe even more. Every time we cut away from the action in the cell, the tension dies.

What, then, is going on with Fake Picard anyway? "Allegiance" strings us along for a while by pretending there's a deeper meaning in the duplicate's actions. Obviously he's stalling for time; his first action on the bridge is to redirect the ship to a visit a pulsar at low warp. He covers with Riker by asking if he can count on his First Officer's trust, and then he politely asks Geordi to improve Engineering efficiency. So maybe, in addition to the stall, the duplicate is testing how the *Enterprise* crew responds to orders. That would certainly put a new spin on the Fake Picard and Beverly date. After two and a half seasons worth of barely discernible sexual tension, the duplicate asks Beverly to his room for dinner, and a surprisingly frank discussion about the nature of their relationship. Maybe he's seeing how command can affect romance, but that's not really how it plays. This, and most everything else we see from the Fake Picard, plays more like someone who's playing around with the possibilities of being human than anything clinical. And that's what it very well could be; one of the problems with the episode is that we get no really pay-off to all the time we spend with Fake Picard. Sure, Riker eventually steps up and takes over the ship, but by the end, Fake Picard was distinct enough from the real version that he needed some kind of send-off more satisfying than "Oh, right, he's just an alien too." (This confused me, as the kidnappers say that they have machines that can duplicate organic

matter and brain function, which led me to believe that Fake Picard was actually a separate entity. As it's filmed, it looks like he and Mitena are just suits.)

Enough about that, though. Let's check in with the real Picard. I've already outline the situation above, and introduced the characters, and, well... okay, that about wraps it up, honestly. One of the reasons we spend so much time watching Fake Picard is that there isn't much for the real Picard to do. His cell is small, there's limited materials to work with, and the characters he's trapped with aren't interesting enough to really warrant much discussion. Conversations proceed on the expected routes; Picard is reasonable (I love his efforts to make sure their captors know they're intelligent.), Tholl is whiny, Esoqq grows a lot. There's some mildly interesting paranoid that develops near the end, but even that is handily defeated by Picard's calm rationality. Maybe that's why this plotline feels so artificial to the show (beyond the obvious artificiality of it all being a test): Picard is just too sane to fall for any of it. He's clever, of course, able to piece together the circumstances, as well as see through Mitena's lies (she knows more information about the *Enterprise's* travels than a simple cadet should), but it's the sanity that makes all of this a little foolish. He simply applies common sense to the problem, and renders the experiment null.

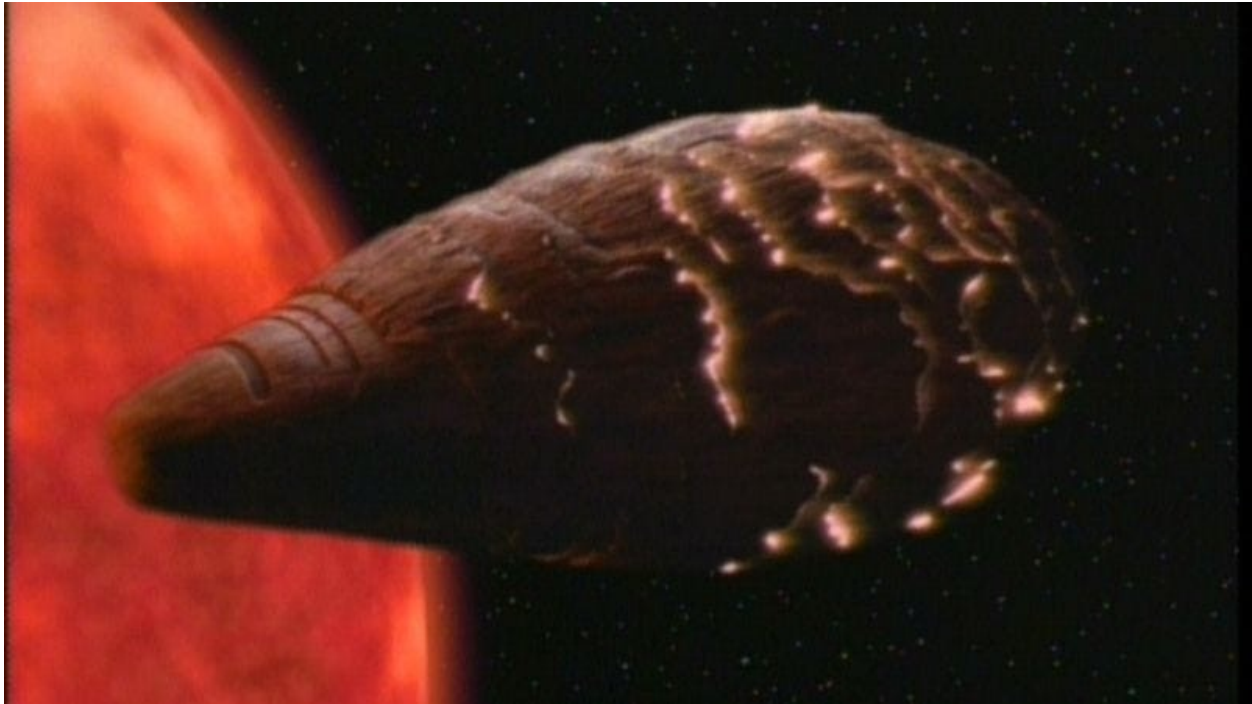
Thankfully, this rationality leads to the episode's best moment, a scene good enough for me to bump this one up half a letter grade, even if it doesn't really redeem the rest of a passable but half-hearted entry. Once the real Picard is back on his bridge, he and the bridge crew trap two of the alien kidnappers. The aliens, terrified of any sort of containment, immediately panic, and Picard informs them that he himself has some tests he'd like to run. He stretches out the torment for a few extra seconds, then frees the creatures, making sure they understand that Starfleet knows who they are, and knows what their weakness, so they should probably give the whole "kidnapping for scientific purposes" a rest. It's one of the only times when "Allegiance" isn't working off of somebody else's playbook. A hallmark of the Godlike Being is that it renders our heroes helpless; for once, we get to see the good guys turning the tables, and it's a legitimately thrilling moment. Overall, this episode was too lazy for my tastes, especially coming on the heels of the excellent "Father"; this one just regurgitated stale concepts, and failed to follow through on the few good ideas it managed to unearth. Still, it felt good to see Picard getting the upper hand, because really, I don't care if you do provide your captors with the materials to make a rudimentary lathe—kidnapping is still just plain *wrong*.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- The scene between Fake Picard and Beverly was a relief; good to finally have all those hints and missed opportunities out in the open. Now if it only had any consequences beyond a pre-credits stinger...
- "This concept of morality is a very human characteristic." Somehow I doubt that.
- "In any rate, we now know of your race and we know how to emprison you. Bear that in mind. Now get off my ship." Hells yes.
- Next week, we go on "Captain's Holiday," and check our hearts at the door for "Tin Man."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Captain's Holiday"/"Tin Man"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[10/07/10 10:00AM](#)

"Captain's Holiday"

Or The One Where Picard Goes On Vacation, Fights Crime, Blows Stuff Up

I can think of no greater praise for the cast of *TNG* than to acknowledge their ability to maintain their dignity regardless of what fresh horror the costume designer forces on them. The uniforms aren't so bad, but the leisure wear is a disaster, a hideous explosion of flowing wraps, gauze, and various unpleasantries in spandex. There's an outfit Jean-Luc Picard wears during the mid-section of "Captain's Holiday" that probably would've killed a lesser man: a kind of loose-fitting jacket, combined with some deeply unsettling shorts. He is required to be forceful while wearing this, to express scorn, irritation, indeterminate lust, and worse, he is, in some choice moments, lounging. I'm not one to be upset by the male or female form in its natural state, but nothing about the presentation here is natural. Watching this scene, I find myself identifying with the sons who covered Noah in his drunkenness. That I remember anything else from the episode is, quite frankly, astonishing.

Which isn't to say "Holiday" is astonishing—it's not. It's not bad, either. It's... a lark? Yes, that sounds about right. The episode gives Picard a rare solo adventure while he's vacationing on Risa, a getaway planet with the usual open approach to sexuality the Federation requires in their recreational zones (I'm starting to wonder if, "Can you tap that?" is the main determinant as to which planets get deemed "resort spots."). The tone is light throughout, and the plot is a breezy homage to those detective novels that Picard so favors. No murder to solve, but there is a femme fatale, a thuggish villain, and some interested parties who may not be entirely what they seem. It's the sort of ep I would've hated growing up, because there's no real teeth to it. Even the time travel element is more for flavor than any real depth. Watching the episode now, I can enjoy it as a showcase for Patrick Stewart, and I can appreciate that

the femme fatale he squares off against is actually somewhat age appropriate. I can also find the storyline somewhat ridiculous, because hey, apparently that part of my brain never shuts off.

Of course, "Holiday" doesn't start on Risa. It should've, because nothing that happens in the first ten minutes aboard the *Enterprise* really has much bearing on anything. It's all a variation on a very simple joke: Picard is stressed, but he doesn't like to take vacations. That's the punchline to every set-up, as various crew members, aware of his tension levels, do their best to cajole, encourage, trick, and force him into leaving the ship for a week of shore leave. As is often the case with humor on the show, it's a little too sitcom-ish for my tastes, although there are moments of cleverness. Beverly's "I have a patient who needs to relax" speech is made less painful by the fact that neither she nor Picard make any pretense that Picard doesn't immediately know who she's talking about, and Troi's claim that her mother will be visiting the ship soon is funny enough. Picard eventually yields and packs a bag, lingering just long enough to get a gift request from Riker, and to hear his reading choices criticized. (Screw Riker, I think *Ulysses* would make for excellent beach reading.)

Then it's off to Risa, where the real fun begins. There are factions here. We've got Vash (Jennifer Hetrick, who's actually 18 years younger than Stewart, but at least she looks like a grown woman), the temptress, who's on the run from Sovak (Max Grodenchik), a Ferengi in a regrettable shirt who believes Vash has something that belongs to him. Soon enough, Sovak comes to believe that Vash and Picard are working together. Vash is not what one would call discouraging of this assumption. And on the sidelines, we have two aliens called Vorgons who claim to be from the 27th century. They've traveled into the past in search of the Tox Uthat, a fabled doohickey of amazing power (it can stop a star, but don't get too worried because that never really becomes relevant) which another Vargon thief stole from their present and ditched somewhen in the 24th century. According to their history, Picard supposedly discovers the Uthat while on Risa, and these Vorgons totally want to be there when it happens.

If you've already guessed that Vash and Sovak are on the hunt for the Uthat, give yourself a cookie. If you've further guessed that the Uthat is really nothing more than a MacGuffin with sci-fi decals pasted on, well, two cookies wouldn't hurt. Yes, it's an immensely powerful weapon, and that makes it valuable, which gives a certain edge to the proceedings, but it's a textbook plot driver. Everything about this episode is archetypal, from Vash, who rides the expected line between "traitorous" and "vulnerable," just charming enough to ensnare Picard in her escapades but not so charming as to pull the wool completely over his eyes, to Sovak, who's just smart enough to be annoying, but not so smart as to be really that dangerous. *TNG* is almost entirely made up of standalone episodes, connected by the universe the characters inhabit and the occasional references to past events, but "Holiday" seems more standalone than most. I doubt anyone was trying for a spin-off here (Vash is enjoyable, but I can't imagine watching her as a series lead), but that's almost what this plays like, a brief dip into a world that runs parallel to the one where we spend most of the series. There are no consequences here, but you know that from the start, even with those crazy time travelling aliens. This is a diversion, and as such, it's agreeable.

As to those aliens... well, okay, me being me I'm going to have to bring this up, but they time travel, and they know in their histories that Picard finds the Uthat, and we learn later on that they also knew he would destroy the Uthat rather than hand it over to anyone, so why aren't they more aggressive? Vash gives us some overly convenient exposition near the end—something about a pair of male and female aliens bothering her last employer, who'd devoted his life to finding the Uthat—that clearly implies these two are after the Uthat for nefarious reasons. They aren't happy when Picard destroys it. So why not just, I dunno, shoot him with some future beams or something and grab it? One of the problems with time travel as a story device is that writers rarely think through the consequences. If these two Vorgons really can travel through time, and if they know exactly when and where what they want is, there is no reason they can't have it, and no real reason that Picard should've been able to blow the Uthat up as easily as he does.

This is acknowledged in Picard and Vash's last scene; she points out that, as the Vorgons can come back to this particular point in their past whenever they wish, she and Picard may be reliving their time together over and over again throughout eternity. It's a sweet sentiment, but not one that bears much consideration. Because if the Vorgons keep returning, well, sooner or later, they're going to get tired of the run around. Once they realize Vash has the Uthat all along, there's nothing to stop them from getting it directly from her, and maybe even bumping off any vacationing Starfleet personnel that might interfere. That's the problem with time travel, you see. Things are never as simple as you want them to be.

That's about all there is to this one. The Ferengi are as annoying as always, and Sovak's crush on Vash—he's turned on by her trickery—is just weird. There are some good gags, and it's nice to see Picard get a little more play than the standard allotment of meaningful looks with Beverly. In the end, Picard gets his relaxation by having a sort of holodeck adventure in the real world, so at least we can rest assured knowing he won't take an ax upside Wesley's head any time soon. Kind of a shame, come to think of it. (I kid, I kid. Wesley's okay. I'd be satisfied with a minor flogging.)

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- Riker: "Have I mentioned how imaginative the Risian women are, sir?" Troi: "Too often, Commander."
- Oh, Riker trying to set Picard up for some loving? Perfectly in character, and also, total jerkwad move. I can't imagine anything less relaxing than inadvertently declaring myself a sexual dynamo to a bunch of strangers. (I prefer to keep my true powers a secret, thank you very much.)
- "All I require is to sit in the sun and read my book, alone." Why do people always have such a hard time believing this?

"Tin Man"

Or The One Where The Mayor Of Sunnydale Shows His Softer Side

Being around people isn't the easiest experience in the world. Even close friends can be a drag sometimes, not because of anything intentional, but because when you're around others, you have to maintain a certain poise. The lucky ones learn this when they're young, but the rest of us learn it eventually. We have to; you can't function in the world without some kind of persona to present outwards. Without that, it's just raw nerves and impulse and need, and you have to hide that, somehow. You have to have a place you can retreat to when necessary, a place where no one gets in, a place where you're safe to think the worst and want the worst and feel selfish and stupid and mean. It's easy, then, to understand why Tam Elbrun is so on edge. He can see into everyone's secret places without any effort at all, and I imagine that must get lonely fast. All that looking out—and no one's looking in.

I have mixed feelings about "Tin Man," sad to say. The idea is solid, but it's underdeveloped, and too much of the episode feels like a pointlessly long journey to arrive at a conclusion that was obvious from the start. All the smart ideas here are played out by the midpoint, and while that doesn't make them any less smart, it does make the episode's climax, which should be a deeply moving connection between two lost souls, oddly rote. As well, the Tin Man ship never gets enough of a personality. Tam is clearly defined, but the object of his obsession, in the end, comes off too much like the answer to all his prayers. That's not effective storytelling. Not every wish has to be made on a monkey's paw, but it would be nice if the happy ending here didn't feel quite so convenient.

The set-up is another one of Starfleet's ultra-secret missions. The *Enterprise* is the specialest ship in the fleet, so of course they get stuck with the really tricky high-priority stuff. In this case, it's escorting a psychic expert in alien relations, Tam, to meet with what's been dubbed "Tin Man," a living ship of unknown origin which is currently

orbiting around a soon-to-nova star. This star is in a far reach of space which has yet to be officially mapped, and, unfortunately, the Romulans consider it a part of their dominion, despite not having any legitimate claim. Legitimacy for Romulans seems to be established mostly through blowing up anyone who objects (in their defense, they're far from the first to employ this tactic), so that's going to be a problem. Despite all the Federation's best efforts at secrecy, the *Enterprise* gets a tail immediately after beaming Tam aboard. Five bucks says it's not a surprise party.

All of this would be bad enough, but Tam himself is what can be kindly called "difficult." Harry Groener is a character actor who's done a fair share of television and movie work, but I'll always remember him as the Mayor in the third season of *Buffy*. (Or, in my lighter moments, as "that goofy Danny Elfman-looking dude.") He was amazing on *Buffy*, funny, ridiculous, and menacing all at once, but the Mayor was a confident super-villain, and Tam isn't either of those things. I'm not sure what to make of his performance, honestly. It's off-putting, but that's at least partly by design. Tam isn't supposed to be likable, and he goes out of his way to tell everyone that he isn't likable, which is never an easy angle to play as an actor. It feels overly self-conscious, and while it's possible to pull off, I'm not convinced it works here. Groener does his best, and during his conversations with Data, you can see the decent person buried under all that self-loathing. It's just too bad the rest of his performance is so shallow and showy. All the difficult characters the *Enterprise* has had to deal with over the years have been showy; wouldn't it have made sense to have this one, this man who was hearing other people's thoughts before he even knew the difference between "me" and "Them," be a little more subdued?

At least he gets a compelling backstory. In addition to Troi's explanation of how they met, we get some references to the "Ghorusda incident," which sets Riker against Tam almost from the start. We're never given a complete story, but from the pieces of information we do get (most of which come from Tam himself), he was serving as a bridge between a Federation outpost and an alien race called the Ghorusda. When problems arose, Tam had a hard time remembering which side he was supposed to be on. That makes sense. Someone with his condition would have a hard time forming boundaries between himself and others, and since he's bombarded by every thought and feeling around him, well, good vibrations must be the order of the day. Really, the more I think about it, the more amazing it is that Tam even exists as a conscious entity. There's a short story by Philip K. Dick called "The Golden Man"—they made it into a Nicolas Cage movie, *Next*, but don't hold that against it. The idea is, (and I'm totally going to spoil the story here, so feel free to skip to the next paragraph) there's a mutant who can see all possible consequences of any action he takes. Which means he can always pick the best option, ensuring his long-term survival and success. The cool part is, the Golden Man has no discernible consciousness. Because he can foresee all outcomes, there's no need for an intelligence, just the instinct to know which decision benefits him most. Tam's abilities aren't exactly the same—he can't see the future, obviously—but given the desire to please, and the talent for knowing what everyone wants... well, I'm not sure, but I think the results would be more complicated (and less hopeful) than what we see here.

Again, though, I'm falling into the trap of criticizing what I think "Tin Man" *should* have been, instead of commenting on what it is: the story of two lonely creatures finding mutual salvation in each other. That's a lovely idea, and there are times when the episode captures that sense of wonder and belonging. It helps that Tam becomes closest friends with Data, who is the only person on the *Enterprise* who seems to understand him. Troi claims she does, but as Tam and Tin Man come closer together, Troi is insistent that they be kept separate for fear that Tam might lose himself in the alien entirely. Data's the only one who trusts Tam's judgment, and what's interesting here is the subtle but distinct impression you get by the end that Troi wasn't entirely wrong; that Tam may indeed have lost himself; but that in losing himself, he finds the only happiness possible to him. There's an ambiguity in that, even if Tin Man itself (or Gomtuu, as it prefers to be called) is disappointingly generic. The ship looks like a giant glowing pine cone, the insides are all brown organic blah, and there's no sense of the ship's personality, if it even has one. So

it's nice, then, that at the end, as satisfied with his place as Tam is, it's still possible for us to feel a little uneasy about the whole process.

While all this is going on, we do get some back-and-forth with the Romulans, and the realization that, if they can't communicate with the living ship, the Romulans won't hesitate to destroy it. So that gives us some sense of stakes, at least until Tam uses his mental mojo to warn Gomtuu, and Gomtuu sends out a wave of energy that destroys the Romulans and cripples the *Enterprise*. Which should give us a different sort of stakes, come to think, and it almost does. Picard is worried that any interference with Tin Man could further damage the *Enterprise*, and that Tam, who's the only person on board able to communicate with the ship, isn't guaranteed to have the crew's best interests at heart. But even this conflict is swiftly resolved, and once Tam enters Gomtuu, that's basically it. The ship has the power to do just about anything, and it proceeds to throw the *Enterprise* and the remaining Romulan vessel a few billion kilometers away, before beaming Data back to the bridge and going about its merry way. (You could say there's some ambiguity as to whether or not Tam and Tin Man survive the star going super nova, but since Data returns to the bridge *after* the sun goes boom, I don't think it's that ambiguous.)

Sometimes I'll watch a *Trek* episode and have a completely unshakable opinion; whatever anyone else thinks, I know what I think, and I don't have any intention of backing down. That doesn't happen very often, though. "Tin Man" is one of the other kind. I keep wondering if I should like it more than I do, if there's some extra piece I'm missing, or if my ideas of how to make the story better get in the way of appreciating what's on the screen. I certainly don't think this is a bad episode. It just feels like it could've been, and should've been, more.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Not a good episode for Troi. In addition to misreading Tam's needs, she tells him his opinion of Data as "restful" is "unique." Apart from some anti-android resentment, I can't imagine anyone on the ship thinking of Data as anything *but* restful.
- Still, the final scene between her and Data is very nice. "When Tin Man returned me to the Enterprise, I realized, this is where I belong." (Although, not to be a dick or anything, but has Data ever expressed doubt about this?)
- We'll be out next week, but be back 10/21, when we meet Barclay for the first time in "Hollow Pursuits," and get some Data face time with "The Most Toys."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Hollow Pursuits"/"The Most Toys"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[10/21/10 10:00AM](#)

"Hollow Pursuits"

Or The (First) One With Barclay

It's hard not fitting in. Everyone knows this; we all have some time in our lives when we felt like we weren't in step with the group no matter how hard we tried. But there's a special kind of hell reserved for being stuck in a group of nice, friendly folks who make every effort to make you feel welcome, and you still keep stuttering and tripping and generally making a fool of yourself. Assholes are never fun to be around, but at least when they treat you badly, you can tell yourself they're the ones with the problem. What do you do when the ones holding you down are blameless? What do you do when the only person you can really blame for your misery is yourself?

If you're Reginald Barclay of the *USS Enterprise*, you create a holodeck simulation that features some of your crewmates, allowing you to mock the ones that terrify you with their self-confidence, and win the hearts of the ones you wish to woo. It's not a very good solution, seeing as how poor Reg is still late half the time, and can't speak more than three words without nearly choking to death on his embarrassment. But that's the fun thing about social humiliation: it makes you so desperate for any kind of love or respect, you cling to any response that lets you feel even a little less miserable. At the start of "Hollow Pursuits," Barclay is clinging as hard as he can, and he's inches away from getting a transfer to another ship. It's the first time on the show I can remember seeing Geordi actively frustrated with someone under his command, and it's also the first time we've seen our main characters from the perspective of someone who doesn't neatly fit in to their group. It's an interesting experience, and while "Pursuits" has its problems, it's also a telling look at how even a utopian society can still have its share of losers.

Before we get into that, though, can we all agree that Barclay's holodeck programs are utterly ridiculous? I don't mean ha-ha ridiculous, although they have their moments; Riker's diminutive double is funny, and the actors clearly enjoy getting a chance to spoof themselves. What I mean is, there is no way any of this should be possible. Allowing a crew-member to use the likenesses of his fellow crew-members in this kind of elaborate, detailed simulation, while everyone is stuck together on a space ship hurtling through the void—well, I'm not sure it's a good way to relieve stress (one of the points of the episode is that Barclay's fantasies let him hide from his problems, which means he doesn't ever deal with them in a constructive way, which means he's never going to get better), and it's definitely an excellent way to create uncomfortable situations.

I can't remember which psychologist first discussed this (I think it was Jung), but there's a danger in having imaginary conversations with the people in your life. Everybody has them; it's a way to feel more in control, a way to rehearse difficult moments before they happen, a way to try and determine the best way to elicit the desired reaction out of someone without actually having to deal with them directly. (And yes, it's a way to find comfort from a person who will never give you what you need.) The problem is, if you do this too often, it gets difficult to tell the difference between what you've really said, and what you've only dreamed of saying. Not necessarily in a "psychotic break" way, either, but in a very down-to-earth, it's happened to all of us deal. It's subtle, but it colors your perception of a relationship when you've fantasized about telling so-and-so how much you hate it when they do such-and-such. Even though you've never worked up the courage to deal with them directly, part of you remembers all those fake confrontations, and becomes resentful. Interactions are difficult enough as it is, and the more you can focus on dealing with someone when they're actually around, the better you'll be in the long run.

Now, imagine this with the holodeck involved. Barclay is the most harmless possible iteration of a disturbed personality—he's basically just a shy, nerdy teenager who has the misfortune of being stuck in an adult body. The greatest sins we see him committing in his electric dreams are making time with Troi, and winning fights against his betters, and going by the reactions of Geordi and the others when they discover his programs (all right, so the holodeck just allows anyone to wander inside, mid-routine? I can understand a senior officer being able to override a lock, but at the very least, you'd think there'd be some kind of warning to Barclay that he was no longer alone), this is all a completely new experience for them. That's part of *TNG*'s whole perfect-future kick, that everyone's problems are solvable; Barclay's troubling because his solution isn't readily evident, not because he's dangerous or upsetting. But like I've said before, I have a hard time believing in a future like this, and I have an even harder time accepting that no one would realize the potential psychological havoc the holodeck could wreck. Imagine if Barclay had become convinced the real Troi had feelings for him, and that all he had to do to win her was take care of that stooge Riker?

This is a conceptually intriguing episode because it deals (even in an incredibly polite and un confrontational fashion) with misfits on a ship that's designed to make everyone feel at home. We get to see how unpleasant it might be to have to deal with these people if you weren't on their wave-length, and Geordi's inability to understand that someone could just be insecure and over-worked doesn't speak very well for him as a boss. I've heard the Barclay gets more intolerable with each successive guest appearance, but I like Dwight Schultz, and I like that Barclay is legitimately awkward and not just nervous. It just seems so obvious that he's overwhelmed and unsure of himself, and Geordi's complete bafflement (especially considering that it's, y'know, *Geordi*, aka, "Not Mr. Cool") speaks to how ill-prepared anyone on this ship is for dealing with anyone who's not strictly normal.

Riker acts like a hard-ass, as though Barclay's repeated tardiness is a malicious or blatantly irresponsible act—but of course Riker would go the tough love route, the guy is probably champing at the bit to get a chance to play lovable army sergeant. And Picard, well, Picard has never been much use in trying to deal with people; he's not inept, exactly, he's just enough of a social deviant himself (albeit in far more productive, easier to manage ways) that this isn't his field. But Welsey? Freakin' Welsey Crusher comes up with a nickname for Barclay, and interrupts him

during a staff meeting, and then doesn't understand why the guy is a little on edge. Even Troi is a waste. For a supposed empath, her ability to read that Barclay is infatuated with her and, because of this, intensely nervous around her is bizarre. I can accept that she's used to men (and the occasional woman) on the ship finding her attractive, but her attempts to relax him by turning down the lights and getting physically closer are not the actions of someone who understands what their patient is feeling.

Right, I haven't really gotten much into the plot, have I? I have notes, but let's face it, this all boils down to: Barclay needs to find some way to prove himself. So there's a crisis on the ship, and Barclay's the one who figures it out, after we get some amusing holodeck sequences, and have to squirm our way through the humiliation of Riker and Troi finding out just what the poor guy thinks of them. Everything else is just a science fiction MacGuffin designed to make Reg's redemption possible. There are good ideas here, and Schultz give an performance just the right side of creepy, but in the end, this plays too much like a children's show. That's always a tendency with *TNG*. The best episodes ignore it or subvert it by refusing us easy answers, but here, everybody worries about Barclay, Barclay hates himself, then Barclay ends up okay. There's a lovely scene at the end that at first plays like the poor guy is transferring off the ship, but instead turns out to be him saying good bye to his simulations; it's nicely done, but I wonder if the episode might not have been better if Barclay really had left at the end. Sometimes we forget that just wanting to be a part of a group doesn't make that group the right one for us.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- I like how there are only two possible women on board the ship that Barclay could have a crush on. Both this and "The Most Toys" feature characters who could easily be fictional versions of accepted nerd stereotypes—here we have "The Guy Who Keeps Writing Fan Fiction."
- "Have you ever been with a counselor before?" Yeah. It was over in five minutes, but she still charged me the full hour! Woo! Okay, moving on.
- Nice reference to "Booby Trap."
- All right, Troi claims they need to leave Barclay's holodeck program running when they go looking for him so they can get a glimpse into his psyche. I can sort of buy that. But the instant Picard calls and tells them he needs them back at work, why doesn't Geordi just turn off the simulation? Did the writers forget that none of this was actually real?

"The Most Toys"

Or The One Where Data Is A Valuable Collector's Item

There are sometimes shows that run under the surface of our favorite shows—well, maybe not shows entirely, but suggestions of deeper motives and darker implications than the surface level allows. As a critic, my biggest fault (well, okay, one of my biggest faults) is my tendency to over-think things. With some series or books or movies, this can be a liability, as I'll either give credit where it isn't due by seeing something that doesn't actually exist; or else I'll over-consider a concept until I can no longer remember why anyone would enjoy it in the first place. But in reviewing *Trek*, in all the iterations I've seen so far, over-thinking has served me well. That's part of the fun of watching genre television, after all. They give us the worlds, and the barest of trappings to color them, we provide the minutia.

For instance, "The Most Toys" is arguably just a variant on "The Measure of a Man." It is an excellent variant, no question, and it stands quite well on its own, but we are dealing here with concepts of ownership and sentient property, and we already know the answers to these questions. Thankfully, this time the antagonist is a non-

Federation man, which means we don't have to worry about Starfleet suddenly forgetting the lessons it should've already learned. Data's conversations with the horrible Mr. Fajo (played by the not horrible, and in fact quite excellent, Saul Rubinek) take us down familiar semantic paths, but they remain satisfying, for all their familiarity, because it's good to see Data standing up for himself. Fajo is a particularly nasty villain; *TNG* doesn't always do nasty bad guys, and it's a pleasure here to see one who's both fully drawn and completely reprehensible.

There's something else going on here, too, and it's much more subtle. For a call-back, it mostly reminds me of one of the final scenes of "The Ensigns of Command," when a pretty young woman tried to put the moves on Data, and got, well, exactly what you'd expect. Nobody flirts with Data in "Toys," but there is that same fascinating glimpse of Data's alien nature, that same peek below the surface of a being who appears charming and harmless, but has a good deal more depth to him than anyone, even his friends, really realizes. It makes me wonder if maybe there's an episode that never got filmed, that told some darker story about our favorite android. It makes me wonder just what the hell he gets up to with all those countless hours he spends aboard the Enterprise, not sleeping, not eating, just being there.

It's this subtle character exploration that gives "Toys" its edge. The plot is straightforward enough: Mr. Fajo collects one of a kind items. Data is a one of a kind item, so Mr. Fajo fakes Data's death and then collects him. There is then much discussion between Data and Fajo about the nature of captivity, about Data being a sentient being who is unaccustomed to ownership. It's terrific stuff, because Rubinek is nerdy without ever being likable, and Data is always the most interesting when he's in a situation where a human being would experience emotion. His reactions throughout the episode have this wonderful ambiguity to them, summarized beautifully in his final line (which is in *Stray Observations*, if you forgot it); he has no feelings, but it's impossible not to hear his words and feel some sense of righteous fury yourself. There is something implacable about Data. It's almost always used as a joke—his constant questions about the reasons behind illogical behavior, his explanations, his inability to understand when a conversation has reached a conclusion. Once Data reaches a conclusion, and has exhausted all other avenues, he will not weaken out of uncertainty or self-doubt or fear. That's not very funny when he turns his implacability on you.

While all this is happening, the crew of the Enterprise is dealing with Data's "death." It's always a compromise when a show has to pretend one of its characters is gone. We know Data isn't really dead, and the writers know this (and know we know it). That means the grief the characters show is essentially wasted screen-time; it's irrelevant to the plot, and as audience members, we don't experience any catharsis watching the mourning because we aren't mourning ourselves. Plus, if Data actually died, you couldn't simply deal with it in a few scenes of one episode. There would need to be some sense of impact, and since Geordi needs to suspect something is wrong almost immediately for the rest of the episode to work, there's just no time to waste on unnecessary tears. (Yes, Tasha Yar's death was given about a scene, but c'mon—it was Tasha Yar.)

So, there's a compromise. Geordi and Wesley are sad, Picard reads a line from a book he gave Data, but there's no real pretense that this is actual raw grief. It plays more like, Data's shuttle explodes, everyone assumes he's dead, and then we cut to a month later after the initial wave of shock and pain have ridden through. You could say that the reason we don't see the impact more is that Geordi "senses" that something is wrong, but that's just a cheat. I don't have a huge problem with this, really, as it's largely dictated by storytelling requirements (and you could even argue that the detachment we see is just professionalism). What I do have a problem with is how much urgency the episode loses every time we cut away from Data and Fajo. Those two (and Fajo's tormented assistant, Varia) are what this episode is really about. Geordi needs to figure out that Data's "death" was faked so that the Enterprise can arrive and beam him back to safety, but his story isn't strong enough to support as many scenes as it gets.

That doesn't stop this from being an excellent episode, thankfully, because Data's storyline is very, very good, and its conclusion is satisfying. After he's kidnapped, Data is forced into essentially passive resistance; Fajo is protected,

and Data can't use physical strength to escape. But his willingness to compromise himself to protect Varia wins Fajo's assistant over, and she helps Data attempt an escape. It's not very successful. While Fajo's thugs are easily dispatched, Fajo manages to use a disruptor on Varia, killing her. The disruptor is a nasty weapon that kills slower than a phaser, causing great pain as it does so, which means things get tense when Data gets the drop on Fajo with one. Fajo is convinced that Data won't fire, but after reasoning out that he has no other choice, Data does fire. It's just lucky for the collector that the Enterprise picks just that moment to beam Data back aboard.

I'll admit it, I was a little disappointed by this. It seemed like a half-measure—let's show Data is capable of killing when given no other choice, but let's not have him actually kill anyone. (Still, he basically lies to Riker back on the ship. Has he ever lied before? I also didn't write down exactly what he said, so I'm not sure if it's a direct lie or a careful evasion. But then, why the evasion? Curious.) Thankfully, the final exchange with Fajo pays off the character's survival. As with "Ensigns," it's another case with a humanoid assuming Data will have an emotional response—here, Fajo assumes Data will gloat. The beauty of it is, Data doesn't show any sign of pleasure or triumph. Because of course he can't. And yet, there must be some reason he went down to see Fajo in the brig, some reason he explained to him that all his possessions are gone. It might just be circuits firing. Or maybe he was thinking of flung acid, a chair, and a dead woman.

Grade: A-

Stray Observations:

- One scene that definitely doesn't work: Troi talking with Worf about his promotion to Data's position. It's pointless, because we know the promotion won't last long, and it makes Troi look nosy and confrontational.
- Spiner is really terrific in this episode. There's a great moment when he's processing his options near the end—it's like if the blinking light on a computer hard drive had a face.
- "Tell me, Data, have you killed yet?"
- "No sir, it does not. I do not feel pleasure. I am only an android."
- General question: I never really thought about it before, but someone recently pointed out to me that my TV reviews are all in present tense. I like writing that way because I like trying to capture some of the excitement of a good episode in the summary, but I honestly don't know how it reads for anyone else. Should I switch to past tense? Is this confusing?
- Next week, it's (woo!) "Sarek" and (oh sweet dear jeebus) "Menage a Troi."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Sarek"/"Ménage à Troi"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[10/28/10 10:00AM](#)

"Sarek"

Or The One Where A Vulcan Cries

After DeForrest Kelley's cameo way back in "Encounter at Farpoint," there hasn't been any cast cross-over between *Star Trek* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. This makes sense from a story perspective; the majority of the crew of the original *Enterprise* were human, and given that *TNG* takes place roughly a hundred years after they were in their prime, well, they're probably all dead now. Except for Kirk, who's stuck in the Nexus, and Scotty, who's stuck in some transporter buffer somewhere. Yeah, you heard me: your precious Uhura? Wormfood. Sulu? Daisy pushing. Chekov? Nothing can kill the Chekov.

This is probably for the best. Given the lumpiness *TNG* experienced at the start of its run, trying to become its own show while still clinging to the legacy it was intended to carry on, guest spots would've been distracting at best, painfully sentimental at worst. Still, it's not like we haven't heard mention of Kirk and his adventures before, so now that the series has hit its stride in the third season, it's a fine time to make some direct connections to the past.

"Sarek" features the return of Mark Lenard to his most famous *Trek* role, as Sarek, Spock's Vulcan father, a brilliant ambassador who's recently passed the two centuries mark. That's long in the tooth, even for a Vulcan, and now, on the eve of what everyone keeps insisting is the most important negotiation of his entire career—Sarek isn't feeling so well. That he's feeling at all, is, you'll understand, a bit of a problem.

While Sarek was never a recurring character on *TOS*, appearing only in one episode (as well as one episode of the animated series—most people these days probably remember him from his few scenes in *The Search For Spock*), he left a significant impression on the franchise; Spock is one of the mythology's central figures, and that grants Sarek a

great deal of importance simply for existing. And yet, nobody ever really remembers Spock's mother, Amanda Grayson. Maybe it's because we're all sexist bastards, but it probably more that Sarek was so clearly and immediately defined in his first appearance ("Journey to Babel," second season) that he became impossible to forget. He's the epitome of the stern, demanding paternal male, representing all of Spock's insecurities and concern over his identity. Sarek is the Vulcan ideal that Spock spent his life struggling to achieve, and because of that, Sarek was a constant presence, whether or not he was physically present. Plus, Mark Lenard is very, very good in the role.

So it's nice to see him back here, especially considering that he gets to play off Patrick Stewart for a decent chunk of his screentime. Both men bring such immense dignity and presence to their roles that it there's something electric to the episode even before the story kicks in. Sarek is a name familiar to *Trek* fans, and Picard and Riker's discussion at the start of the show about how honored they are to host the Vulcan on the *Enterprise*, and what a big deal the talks with the Legarans are, sets the stakes firmly in place so that when things do start to go south, we understand why this is all so important. Although man is there a lot of direct, expository dialog, both in this scene and throughout the episode. I'm not sure if that's unusual for the show, or if I'm just randomly noticing it in this episode, but two-thirds of Picard's lines just exist to clarify obvious facts. (My favorite was, to paraphrase, "Sarek is a Vulcan, losing control of his emotions must be very bad for him." Er, you think?) Stewart sells it, but it's the sort of thing that once you realize what's happening, you can't ignore it.

Sarek comes aboard the ship with his own entourage, including his current wife, Perrin (I guess Sarek has a taste for the human ladies?), a Vulcan named Sakkath, and a human named Ki Mendrossen. Mendrossen attempts to protect Sarek from the rest of the ship, but it doesn't do much good. The ambassador is clearly on edge (there are few explanations for a snippy Vulcan, and none of them fill one with confidence), and his one attempt to attend a public performance, held in his honor, ends with him fleeing the room in tears. A human crying at a symphony? Not a big deal. But when a Vulcan does it... Even worse, the rest of the crew seems to be affected by the Vulcan's bad mood. Wesley and Geordi nearly come to blows, a fight breaks out in Ten Forward, and Beverly Crusher slaps her son for —no reason at all. (How awesome is it that so much of the rage is focused on Wesley?)

One of the strengths of this episode is how quickly the bad feelings are accepted as a problem, and how Beverly and Deana combine forces to efficiently and immediately figure out what's causing it. This isn't a mystery storyline; we know right off that Sarek is the cause of these disturbances, even if we don't know how, and instead of having Picard and the others dance around the issue for half an hour, they jump to the same conclusions. Why wouldn't they? They have the same information that we do: Sarek is behaving strangely, and the bad vibes didn't hit the *Enterprise* until after Sarek arrived. Ergo, he's got something to do with it. Beverly theorizes that Sarek is suffering from Bendii Syndrome, a disease which hits Vulcans late in life, destroying their emotional control and subjecting them to fits of passion, most often in the form of intense anger. (I love how much sense this makes. Remember the Pon Far? The price the race pays for their stoicism is that every so often, the feelings break out, and when they do, they destroy all logic and structure in their wake.) Deanna adds that the reason members of the crew are feeling the same rushes that Sarek experiences is due to the Vulcan's innate telepathic ability. We later learn that the reason the hits are so random is that Sarek's companion, Sakkath, has been using his own telepathic abilities to suppress Sarek's emissions. But now they they're on a ship, and the ambassador is suffering from too much stress for Sakkath to handle him.

There's a beautiful simplicity to this concept, an elegance that makes the tragedy at the heart of the episode all the more powerful. Bendii Syndrome could be viewed as a stand-in for Alzheimer's Syndrome, or it could be representative of any of the hundreds of indignities which await us all in old age (unless science solves everything before we grow up. So get on that, Science). It's resonant because the science fiction aspect isn't used to obfuscate the horror of what's happening. The Syndrome is robbing Sarek of that part of himself which he considers the most valuable, his discipline, and it's doing so in a way that leaves him naked not only to those closest to him, but to anyone who stays in the room with him for more than a few minutes. There's a lot of talk about how crucial it is that

talks with the Legarans go smoothly, but really, that's not where the drama of this episode comes from. We never see the Legarans, we're never that invested in the outcome, apart from hoping Sarek will succeed. This is really about a great individual, dying by inches.

Of course they find a solution in time: a mind-meld between Picard and Sarek, which gives Sarek Picard's stability and control, and forces Picard to endure the rush of a lifetime's worth of pent-up emotion in just a few hours. Like I said, we don't see the talks with the Legarans, and the climax of the episode is actually spent with Picard struggling against Sarek's passions, as Beverly sits nearby and tries to comfort him. It's remarkable work, a level of naked, raw intensity that we rarely get on *TNG*, and in the hands of a lesser actor (basically anyone else in the ensemble), this could've been ridiculous. But Stewart doesn't hold anything back. I think I'm something of a sucker for this kind of acting, so I'll be curious to hear what others thought of it. For me, the scene works, and it makes the final scene of the episode so much more poignant. Sarek has done his job, but his disease remains uncured. Maybe someone will find a cure. Until then, he can take some comfort that his legacy remains intact. Hopefully, that will be enough.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- Geordi to Wesley: "Compared to you, every male on this ship is an expert on women!"
- Beverly to Troi: "I slapped Wesley." (I would like this on a T-shirt, I think.)
- It's great how, once Beverly and Deanna explain to Picard what they think is happening, Picard is determined to resolve the issue, regardless of the threats Mendosson makes to his career. It's less showy than Stewart's acting later on, but more critical to the character: once he's determined the best course of action, Picard is implacable.
- Spock is only mentioned once by name, during Picard's melt-down at the end.
- "I will take my leave of you now, Captain. I do not think we shall meet again." Although the episode listing says otherwise...

"Menage a Troi"

Or The One Where Lwaxana Troi Has Aural Relations With A Ferengi

This could have been so much worse.

TNG can feel very dated at times, but you can't really hold that against the show; all visions of the future have a way of revealing their present, and at its best, the series is able to achieve a level of universality and relevance that makes questions of timeliness irrelevant. Even when that's not the case, it can be fun to see the show try and translate current events into a fictional context. (It's also fun to laugh at the costumes.) While you'd think that these episodes would be the ones to date the fastest, watching the show now, it's the comedy eps that feel the most of their time to me. Many of the jokes are older than the hills, but the gender relationships and plotting are always stuck in that curious era when women were nominally empowered, but still playing out the same tired roles as wives and mothers on most shows and movies. (So much has changed, right?)

But for once, I'm not here to rant; I just think it's amusing that on a show set three hundred years into the future, the best hook they can come up with for a Lwaxana Troi/Deanna Troi relationship is that Lwaxana thinks her daughter should be married, with children. Then again, maybe that's a standard parental thing, and "Troi" never treats Lwaxana's wishes as anything but ridiculous. What's more annoying is that Deanna, in an episode that should be at least as much about her as it is about her mother, is as useless as ever. She gets kidnapped by the Ferengi, along with Riker and Lwaxana, and it's Riker who gets them out of their cell, and it's Lwaxana who uses her (gah) feminine

wiles to convince the Ferengi captain, DaiMon Tog, to release the other two. Deanna basically hangs out, loses her clothes, and senses whatever her mother is going through.

That aside, this is the least obnoxious hour we've spent with Lwaxana and her endless supply of upsetting dresses, because her antics are more driven by good intentions than by the writers' mistaken belief that shrill, sexually aggressive women in their later years are inherently hilarious. I'm still not a huge fan of the character, but watching "Menage," I can see her as something more than a bad idea. She has understandable motivations, and she's even sympathetic and likable by the end. Barrett's performance is more natural than it has been in the past, too. We've had a lot of great episodes this season, and while this one is definitely not great, it's as much an indicator of the show's overall improvement as, say, "Yesterday's Enterprise" was. What has been problematic at best, disastrous at worst in the past is here just a mildly pleasant, occasionally eye-roll-inducing diversion.

All right, so there's a trade conference on Betazed, and the *Enterprise* is involved. For the first time ever, the Ferengi have been allowed to participate in the conference, and they do their best to repay this goodwill by kidnapping three people (including a Starfleet officer), and then attempting to hack into Lwaxana's brain to figure out how her empathic abilities work. As always, the Ferengi are tiresome, cartoonish villains who don't really belong on this show; everyone else gets some modicum of dignity, but the Ferengi act like refugees from an '80s cartoon show. They're played for laughs as greedy, foolish, and pathetic, until they need to be just threatening enough to pull the story along. And did we really need another episode where a Ferengi lusted after a woman outside his species because she stood up for herself? Lwaxana shouts, "Get away from me, you're disgusting," and the Ferengi takes this as a signal to increase his efforts. That's not funny. In fact, it's pretty damn creepy, and the only reason it's not unbearable to watch is that Tog is too goofy to take seriously.

Tog decides to kidnap Lwaxana after she continually spurns his advances, and when he makes his move, Riker and Deanna happen to be standing by (they'd been kissing, which is the first sign we've had in a while that their relationship is still in flux), so Tog grabs them as well. On the Ferengi ship, Riker does his hero bit and gets him and Deanna free, while Lwaxana manipulates Tog by some ear rubbing. It's inoffensive, and silly, and not very much of anything at all.

There is one plotline in the episode that has weight to it: Wesley has finally been accepted into Starfleet Academy, and he's leaving the ship to start school. Wesley's come a long way since the first season, and while I'm not sad to see him go, I don't hate having him around. (He made an easy punchline.) There's some talk about how Wesley can't be sure he'll be assigned back to the *Enterprise* once he finishes school, and Geordi mentions that Picard might not even be captain of the *Enterprise* anymore by then. It's a low-key piece of realism that reinforces how this is just a job for these people, a major part of their lives, but still just a part. Initially, it seems that Wesley's departure will be handled with a similar off-hand tone, as he leaves while the bridge crew is working to track down Riker and the others. There's no big emotional scene, and that would've been a surprising, and smart, way to handle the exit. Instead, Wesley figures out how Riker's sending his message at the last minute, and misses his ship to the Academy in order to help rescue the others.

I suppose I should accept that *TNG*'s view of humor and my own aren't ever going to really converge, but I can give "Menage" this much: the finale made me laugh. Lwaxana trades herself to Tog in exchange for Riker and Deanna's release, and in order to get her back, Picard has to convince Tog that he's a former lover of Lwaxana's who will murder anyone who touches his beloved. So he starts quoting Shakespearean sonnet in full, Patrick Stewart oratory mode. It's amusing, anyway. Lwaxana's willingness to sacrifice herself for her daughter made her a little more likable, and she doesn't spend the whole episode badgering Picard. Also, she never hits on a holodeck character. Small victories, but I'll take what I can get.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- Yes, I know Wesley will be back. Let me dream.
- Next week, we end the season with "Transfiguration" and "The Best Of Both Worlds, Part One."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Transfigurations"/"The Best of Both Worlds, Part 1"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[11/04/10 10:00AM](#)

"Transfigurations"

Or The One Where Alien Jesus Helps Geordi Get Laid

It always bugs me on TV shows when cute girls are really obvious about liking a guy, and the guy doesn't catch on. I mean, sure, I'll buy it if the guy is a creep, or if he's not interested, or if he's so paralyzingly shy that any interaction is beyond him. But when the guy like the girl back, and is just too insecure to make his move ... I dunno. I've been insecure most of my life, like any sensible person would be (I mean, have you seen yourself naked? What the hell is going on there?), but if somebody I had a crush on kept going out of her way to talk to me and smile at me and leave me gigantic openings in the conversation for me to make my move, I would at least acknowledge the opportunity existed, even if I was too much of a wuss to take it. "Transfigurations" opens with Geordi whining to Worf about his romantic problems (note to *TNG*: if you've gotta keep coming back to Geordi not getting laid, I approve of including Worf in the conversation), and the object of his affections is so painfully interested it's hard to feel any sympathy for Geordi at all. Suck it up, man. Worst she can do is laugh.

Although technically, Christy already rejected Geordi way back in "The Booby Trap," so maybe he's just worried she's been taken over by aliens or something. I'm not sure what's changed in Geordi between those two episodes (maybe he's been working out?), but whatever it is, Christy likes it. It's just our poor blind Chief Engineer can't spot the signs, and not even Worf's helpful advice can reach him. Then the *Enterprise* gets a distress signal while charted a previously unexplored region of space, and they find a shuttle crashed on an unknown planet, a seriously wounded alien on the ground beside it. Dr. Crusher connects Geordi's brains to the alien's to help regulate the severely wounded stranger's vitals, and in the exchange, somehow Geordi gets a piece of something that gives him a boost of self-confidence. He starts making out with Christy in the turbo-lift. But just who is this alien? What is it he does? And is it possible to bottle up his mojo and sell it as some kind of over-priced body spray for men?

Judging by the title of the episode and by the effect the alien (who doesn't ever get a real name in the episode; they just call him "John Doe," and I will follow their lead) has on Geordi, I assumed that sudden surge of bravado was going to turn sour soon enough. That's how these stories play out, generally: The geek finds some magical shortcut to coolness, they get to enjoy the shortcut for a few days, and then they sprout fangs and murder everyone. Or else there's pig's blood at the prom or the magic box has to go back to the shop because the switch is stuck on "Stabbing." (If you're trying to figure out what movies I'm referring to, don't kill yourself; only one of those is actually real.) Characters very rarely get exactly what they most desperately need without having to pay a very steep price, and it seemed reasonable to assume that Geordi's brief trip to Real Live Boy Land wouldn't last out the hour. I expected the confidence would turn sour and he'd get violent. That seems to happen a lot.

That's not what happened here, though. "Transfigurations" is a largely conflict free episode—there are arguments, and one major character even gets killed, but he doesn't stay dead very long. (It's Worf. As always, his job on the ship is show how dangerous the danger is by getting his ass kicked. In this episode, he's defeated by a wave of yellow light; next episode, a forcefield takes him out. Stay strong, my Klingon brother!) John Doe isn't a threat, although he puts the *Enterprise* in a couple of tight spots. He heals very quickly, which is vaguely suspicious, but he's also quite nice, and Beverly is quickly taken with him. (Which once again raises the question: How the hell would you ever get romantically involved with a member of another species? Just because they're all vaguely humanoid doesn't mean the genitalia matches up; we've seen the faces, it boggles the mind what might be going on below the waist. If below the waist is even a place where things go on for Doe's people. Ah well. Beverly's a doctor. I'm sure she knows more about all this than I do.)

John also makes a habit of healing people on the *Enterprise*, first inadvertently with Geordi, then fixing O'Brian's dislocated shoulder. (Sorry for another parenthetical, but: O'Brian injures himself on the holodeck. He's kayaking, so it's not like he was attacked, unless he kayaks with bears, but—what about the safety protocols? Surely the system would be designed to prevent any but the most minor injuries. Because if you have a program that can dislocate your shoulder, however accidentally, you have a program that can kill. Join us next week for our latest installment in Why The Holodeck Don't Make No Damn Sense.) Later, of course, he brings Worf back to life after inadvertently breaking his neck. It's emblematic of the short-sightedness of this episode that Geordi's cure, the first one we see, is also the one with the weirdest implications that nobody ever recognizes. There's a big difference between curing a physical ailment and boosting someone's self-esteem, and while the positive effect John has on everyone around him is probably connected to Geordi's good vibes, there's something strange about treating insecurity like a wound. Does this mean that Geordi's passed some personal threshold, or is he just on an adrenaline high that won't last him past third base?

Not that "Transfigurations" is really about any of this. We're more concerned here with John's ascension into godhood or whatever. This is the sort of episode that starts off fairly interesting, gets a little more interesting as it goes, and then just falls apart once it actually has to start answering the questions it's raised. It's all terribly symbolic and reads a little like somebody's a big fan of his *X-Men* comic books: John is one of the last survivors of a race that's been systematically destroyed because his race is reaching a new level in evolution, and that scares people. It scares them real bad because eek, change! And newness! There's a confrontation with one of the bad guys who does all the killing, the bad guys use their mind power to choke everybody on the *Enterprise*, and then John saves them, and turns into one of the aliens from *Cocoon*. It's pretty stupid. *TNG* works best when it's specific in its stories; it can do more archetypal fare (like, say, "The Survivors," in which we're less interested in the mechanics of how everything works than we are in the tragedy of it), but too often, these kinds of vaguely symbolic plots come off as weak and reductive. That's the case here. There's a reason I spent most of this review talking about the edges of "Transfigurations" rather than dealing with its main arc head-on. It's because there's not much to say about another episode in which our heroes are largely passive and in which everything gets tied up in a neat little bow by the end.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- I would watch a show of Worf giving dating advice. Hell, I'd watch a full series.
- "I'm going to hook up your nervous systems with this tricorder." Um, no?
- Late in the episode, there's a shot of everyone on the bridge, and it shocked me to see Troi in her usual spot. I'd completely forgotten about her. Given that John suffers from amnesia for much of the episode, wouldn't it have made sense to consult with her earlier?
- Oh, hey, there's Wesley.

"The Best Of Both Worlds, Part 1"

Or The One Where We Meet Locutus Of The Borg

I've probably mentioned this before, but I write fiction. It's my first love, writing-wise, and one of my favorite aspects of it is the satisfaction I get from fitting the pieces together of a really excellent climax. See, the thing about writing characters is that if you want them to seem real, you can only have them doing things that that sort of person could be expected to do. If your hero is a doctor, it's not a stretch that he'll see a patient or two or that he'll drive a car around or talk to people or maybe even have a drug addiction or be a werewolf. These are varying degrees of possible, but none of them inherently violate who that character is—we accept fantastical elements in stories, but what we don't accept is when characters behave in ways that violate their nature simply to facilitate plot. So if we spend a whole story hearing about how great this doctor is, and then he intentionally murders a toddler, and we're still supposed to believe he's great, only now he's really, really upset about that dead toddler, well, we're not going to buy that.

Or for a better example ... I'm about to spoil the hell out of the ending of *The Mist*, so if you haven't seen it yet (and you should, as it's one of the best horror movies to come out in the past decade or so), better skip to the next paragraph. At the end of the movie, Thomas Jane, distraught over the loss of his wife and the apparent destruction of his entire world, shoots his companions, including his own son, to save them from a more horrible death at the hands of whatever monster lurks around the next turn. He then walks around for maybe three minutes, screaming for something to kill him next, because he's all out of bullets. Then the mist clears away, and the military rolls by, carting survivors from the town he just left, the world restored to some relative version of sanity. None of the individual pieces of this ending are unworkable. Given all the ugliness that happens over the course of the movie, it's possible to accept that he and the others might be driven to group suicide. The arrival of the army, the sudden reveal that everything's okay after all (except for poor Jane, who probably sucks a shotgun 30 seconds after the scene fades to black), that's not inherently bad either. The problem is the abrupt conjunction of the two and the way it forces us to re-examine the shootings in the car. In order for this ending to work, we need to believe the trap that Jane and the others are in almost as much as they do. Given the rush of the rest of the film, we're in the moment when it happens, but by having the rescue arrive less than 5 minutes after the deaths, the scene becomes less about Jane's awful mistake and the way fear corrupts our judgment, and more about how obvious the strings are. Whether or not the characters in that moment would've believed they were trapped, we no longer believe they were, and it becomes nearly impossible to empathize with their choice. Instead of walking away shell-shocked, I kept making jokes about how the next time I shot my son in the face, I'd wait 5 minutes first.

The point of all of this is that plotting means the creation of a succession of plausible events. The greater the stakes of an event, the greater a violation of a character's internal code it requires, the more thoroughly the trap must be set. By the end of "The Best Of Both Worlds, Part 1," Riker orders the *Enterprise* to fire and theoretically destroy a Borg ship. That's not much of a stretch—except the Borg ship has Picard. A good portion of this episode is devoted to

getting us to a point where we'd be willing to believe that Riker would knowingly give an order that would kill his captain. Sure, Picard has been Borg-ified by now, but Beverly insists she could still save him. Doesn't matter. Riker speaks his final line in the episode without any hesitation whatsoever, and what's even more amazing is that we don't doubt his conviction for a second.

"Worlds" isn't complete in and of itself, but it makes a terrific way to close out the third season, and as *TNG*'s first attempt at a finale cliffhanger ending, it's deservedly iconic. Ask anybody what they most remember about this series, and I'm betting 7 or 8 times out of 10 (presuming you can ask that many strangers before they kick you out of the mall), that most will mention this episode. Not the only episode, mind you, just that final, awful scene: most of the cast on the bridge, aggressive newcomer Cmdr. Lt. Shelby insisting that Riker contact Starfleet for advice, and Riker having none of it. Then Picard's robo-zombie gaze filling the view-screen to inform them that hope is dead, meet the new boss. And, of course, Riker's response. This is not a show that's given to taking major risks with its cast. Tasha Yar is the only main character to die, and that was way back in the first season, before we really cared that much about any of these people. To suddenly throw the show's most important character into the cybernetic meat grinder, and to do so in such a way as to imply that he could very well be gone for good? That's heady stuff.

I don't think I watched "Worlds" when it originally aired, so I have no idea if people actually believed Picard was lost. I kind of doubt they did, given Beverly's comments, and seeing as how we never actually see Worf firing the Magic Bullet that will supposedly take out the Borg cube; most cliffhangers don't resolve by just giving us the most obvious next step. But this was back before everyone knew about actor's contracts, before every casting development hit the Internet before the ink was dry. Plus, the episode is structured in such a way as to strongly indicate that Picard is on his way out. Nobody ever suggests it, but there's a lot of talk about Riker getting a promotion, about how he needs to move on and take command of his own ship, and about how his time on the *Enterprise*, as much as it means to him, may have robbed him of something in himself he once valued a great deal. Moxie, I guess, or boldness. This is all partly to help us understand his determination in that final order and maybe suspect he might be trying to prove that he hasn't entirely lost his spine, but it also works to suggest a future for the series in which Riker is seated in the captain's chair, with Shelby slotted into the Number One spot.

Really, this is more Riker's episode than it is Picard's, which is one of those sideways choices that seems counter-intuitive but actually works to the show's advantage. Much of the running time is given over to Riker debating what he should do next, and sparring with Shelby over her mildly aggressive manner (which of course reminds everybody of how Riker himself used to be). The investigation into the recent Borg attack is suitably chilling, but the threat remains in the background for the first half; there are poker games to attend, after all. So it's wonderfully effective when the Borg cube makes its first appearance. The *Enterprise* is en route to the cube's last place of attack when they're ambushed mid-trip by that old classic, an unidentified vessel. Ten seconds later, there it is in the view screen, all bulky and hideous. I don't often get unnerved by *TNG* episodes—it's hardly ever a truly scary show—but that reveal gave me chills. For a long time, the Borg were the threat to beat in the *Trek*-verse, and while countless iterations have diminished the threat (as is understandable since you can't have an unbeatable foe bent on destroying you and your civilization hang around forever), at this point in the franchise, they were still, so far as we knew, unstoppable. And for some reason, they were gunning for Picard.

And it's not just the *Enterprise*; they specifically want Jean-Luc Picard because the *Enterprise* is the strongest ship in the fleet and he is its captain. Which is one of those compliments that I never know quite how to take, honestly. Picard does get a few nice scenes before the Borg finally grab him—his conversation with Guinan is great, as she essentially tries to console him by explaining, "Well, most everyone in your race will be killed, but a few will get away, so that's cool, right?"—but the show does a great trick of giving us a passing-of-the-torch style episode without ever openly admitting that's what's going on. I highly doubt there was any intention to do away with Patrick Stewart; you don't get rid of the best actor on your show just when your show is actually becoming excellent. (That

is, unless Stewart was holding out for more money, in which case this would have to be the best episode-inspired-by-contract-negotiations *ever*.) Still, just seeing him with that zombie make-up, his voice flat, merciless, dead ... Whatever logic tells you, there's a part of the mind that believes he's gone, same as it believes the shadows behind the closet door have teeth. Hell, I know he'll be fine, and I'm still a little concerned.

I should probably point out the trap I was going on about earlier. It comes down to this: The *Enterprise* is chasing the Borg cube, which is headed for Earth. They need to slow the ship down long enough to use their big guns on it—a weapon that can only be used once, by the way, although that's basically true of every weapon when it comes to the Borg—so an away team beams aboard the cube to find some way to force them to drop out of warp. They shoot some distribution nodes, which has the desired effect, and they find Picard's empty uniform, which freaks everybody out. Back on the *Enterprise*, everything's set for the magic bullet weapon, except when the away team beams back, they tell Riker that Picard is still alive, only he's been turned. Shelby begs for a chance to go back to get him, but the problem is, the Borg cube is already regenerating the damaged components. It'll be back at top warp speed momentarily, and the *Enterprise* engines have been so drained by the chase that they won't be able to retake the ship. And they can't just go back and destroy some more nodes, because the Borg will be prepared. This is the only chance to stop the cube before it reaches Earth.

So Riker makes his choice, and, at least for now, sacrifices Picard. It's really very elegantly done, and all of it is built on information we already know about the threat and the characters. We know the Borg adapt quickly and that they represent a nearly insurmountable threat, and we know that the crew of the *Enterprise* is trained to keep going about their duties even after losing one of their own. I love cliffhangers, because I love how they feel—like someone pausing in the middle of a sentence, staring at you, grinning, driving you out of your mind. ("SAY IT!") The resolutions are nearly always disappointing, so I'll be curious to see how this one plays out. (Other than the fact that Picard goes back to being human soon enough, I honestly don't know what comes next.) So let's just savor the moment, shall we? We—and the show—have earned it.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- I really, really wish the "Data takes adages literally" would die. I understand that he doesn't do metaphors very well, but given the amount of memory he has and the information about humans he's acquired during his lifetime, surely he would've heard "The early bird catches the worm" before?
- All right, change of plans—because YOU DEMANDED IT, on Thursday, I'll be doing a season three wrap-up, and then moving on to "Best Of Both Worlds, Part 2."

SEASON FOUR

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Best Of Both Worlds, Part II"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[11/11/10 10:00AM](#)

So there you have it, folks. The third season. The third season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Season numero tres. Not season one or season two. The one after that. You know the one I'm talking about. Awwwww yeah.

Okay, let's be honest: the reason I did a "season overview" when we got to the end of season two a few months back is that there were an odd number of episodes, and I wanted an easier week. So here I am, pretending like I'm actually able to think of the show in discrete, 20+ episode chunks. I'm not; I remember most of what went on, and I'm fortunate that I have all these helpful reviews lying around to remind me of what I've forgotten, but trying to make sense of all this? Please. I'm lucky if I can remember socks. (Not wearing socks. Just the concept of socks eludes me—I mean, I get that there are feet, and there are shoes, but what's this nonsense about putting something between them?) Plus, and once I've got a good whine going I refuse to be stopped, season two was easier to recap because a lot of it wasn't very good at all. I could cherry pick the good moments and then proceed to take a lot of cheap shots at the rest of the crap. And you guys know me. You *know* I love them cheap shots like sweet, idiotic candy.

Here we are, nearly halfway through the series (and this current project isn't even a year old! We'll do 'em yet), and while the cheap shots are there, they're harder to come by. *TNG* has come down with a bad case of quality; I don't think I went below a "C" grade this entire season, and I'm not even sure I went that low. *TNG* has finally become the sort of show where you don't have to say, "Hold on, I'm sure it will get better next week." Good episodes are no longer an anomaly, which makes watching them more enjoyable but means I can't just fall back on "Gosh, Wesley's a bit of a nit, isn't he?" jokes anymore. *TNG* is finally worth of the *Star Trek* mantle; I'd say this was overall at least as good as *TOS*' first season, and maybe even as good as its second. Or maybe even better? I dunno, I hate ranking like that. The point is, we don't have to make excuses anymore. It's actually possible to say, "I prefer *TNG* to *TOS*" now and not have anyone snicker.

Most bad-ass moment: Data has his revenge, "The Most Toys"

I know, I know. "Why didn't you pick Riker's final command in 'Best Of Both Worlds, Part I'?" That's a good question—and looking back, this isn't a season that lacked for ass-kickery. There's the "The Hunted," which starts off about a guest star kicking butt and climaxes with Picard exerting his Prime Directive obligations in perhaps the greatest example of a passive-aggressive smack-down I've ever seen. There's "Sins of the Father," which has Picard and Worf both proving their worth against the Klingon Empire. There's "Yesterday's Enterprise," which is nearly a full hour of the *Enterprise* crew going hardcore. (Er, not that way. T'other way.) (Also, man you're gross.) Picard's mind-meld breakdown at the climax of "Sarek" is kind of bad-ass. And of course, there's that last beat in "Worlds," which works as both an amazing cliffhanger and a character highpoint to boot. In the end, I pick Data, not because his decision to kill and his final confrontation with his kidnapper was the most dramatic of these or the most intense; it's just the one that was the most unexpected. He remains a mystery—a sympathetic, even lovable character who is still utterly alien.

I can't think of anyone who improved dramatically this season, apart from the show itself. Deanna Troi remains a non-entity, Wesley was tolerable, and it was nice to have Beverly back in the doctor's chair. Looking over my recap from season two, I see a lot of goofy headlines, but I'm not feeling that right now. I'm glad I switched to two episodes a week on the show, because the stories are finally deserving that level of attention, but it also makes it harder for me to hold together a picture of the entire season. So! We all agree, "Best Of Both Worlds, Part 1" is amazing, though I think "Yesterday's Enterprise" is probably my favorite overall episode of the season (and of the series thus far); "Worlds" isn't really complete in and of itself, and while the combined two-parter is very strong, it doesn't quite reach the same levels of conceptual elegance as "Yesterday's." This is definitely a matter of personal preference, though.

A while back, I said that *TNG* was a show about consequences, which was, let's face it, a pretty facile thing to say. Good drama is always about consequences because that's where conflict lies. What makes this third season so generally consistent is its depth. The best moments all seem to revolve around pre-existing concepts, like Tasha Yar's death or Data's mind or the threat of the Borg lurking somewhere out in the dark. *TOS* rarely revisited old material; it was a show whose episodes could be viewed practically in any order, which did its best to hit the reset button by the end credits. This is fine, and I would never argue that *TOS* is a shallow series; it just had different intentions. *TNG*, on the other hand, exists in a universe where every outcome could have future ramifications. Not all of them do. Hell, most of the aliens we meet we never see again. But just enough return and just enough old plots resurface to add weight to every decision. It's old lore that Kirk was the fighter and Picard was the thinker. That's because for Kirk, a rash decision endangers his crew; for Picard, a rash decision could endanger civilizations. Heady stuff. It's time to see where we go from here.

Grade: A-

"Best Of Both Worlds, Part II"

Or *The One Where SLEEP!*

Cliffhangers are tricky. But resolving a cliffhanger is nearly impossible.

I should qualify that—resolving a cliffhanger *in a way that maintains the same level of excitement* is nearly impossible. There are plenty of ways to get a hero out of a jam. You can cheat, although I wouldn't advise it. ("He didn't get out of the cocka-doodie CAR!") Nothing wrecks havoc on your narrative's integrity like shifting the pieces of last episode's carefully laid trap until the exit is clearly marked. So you need to have an escape hatch in place from the start, but that shouldn't be that difficult, right? After all, it's not as though you come up with the first half of the story, then screw off for six months and suddenly realize the second half is due *tomorrow* and you need to somehow answer this question in twenty minutes or you'll never pass Beginner's Science Fiction. No "Part I" should

air without a "Part II" either in the can or thoroughly planned out. This isn't a long running fantasy series. Nobody gets to take six years off between seasons just to figure everything out.

So the resolution isn't the tricky bit. The tricky bit is finding a resolution that doesn't feel like a let-down. A cliff-hanger is a sort of narrative implosion: a ton of energy builds and builds right up to a final point, when it all closes in on itself, locking the audience in place, forcing them to fixate all their attention and energies on a single scene. But resolutions always have a way of deflating energy, not intensifying it. Because all of our *TNG*-related thoughts are tuned in on Riker's order, by the time we get around to watching the result of that order, we've played through a thousand different scenarios in our minds. Like the *Enterprise* fires, but the weapon is ineffective. Or "Fire" is actually code word for some secret plan to rescue Picard. Or the *Enterprise* tries to use its magic weapon, but the Borg ship destroys them. Or the *Enterprise* shoots, and the Borg ship is destroyed and Locutus along with it.

Did I say "a thousand different scenarios"? This was a slight exaggeration, and that's the problem. There are only so many ways to finish off a hanging moment like this one, and odds are, you'll come up with the right one. And even if you don't, so much emphasis and expectation is placed on a single moment in an on-going story that when the other shoe finally does drop, you'll most likely be disappointed. Watching these two episodes back to back, if one were able to cut out the end credits of "Part 1" and the "Previously on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*" montage that opens "Part 2," the cliffhanger would be barely noticeable, and that would work just fine. It's impressive from a character perspective that Riker is able to give the order, but his order is made irrelevant so quickly that the sequence, on its own, has only mild dramatic impact. The real drama here comes from seeing Picard as Borg. It would've been possible to cut this scene differently and not lose much in the way of pacing or information—have "Part 1" end with the *Enterprise*'s magic bullet failing, and the crisis would still be relevant. We just wouldn't be so focused on one particular beat. I'm not saying either episode should have handled the cliffhanger differently; using Picard's knowledge as a way to defuse the *Enterprise*'s efforts is a legitimate out, though a mildly shocking one, and it's consistent with the Borg's approach to assimilation. And I can't imagine "Part 1" ending a second sooner or later. It's just interesting to note how our expectations are affected not so much by the contents of the episode, as they are by how those contents are presented.

That goes for the rest of "Part 2" as well, really. As a *TNG* episode, it's excellent, a few minor quibbles aside. The Borg remain a powerful threat, Riker's transition to the captaincy is well-handled, and Picard's eventual rescue and redemption are satisfying and consistent with a show that doesn't really do multi-episode arcs. (Sure, they'll reference details over multiple episodes, but the connective tissue is never as strong as on, say, *Battlestar Galactica*.) And yet it is a little bit of a letdown, because it fails to live up to the epic potential that "Part 1" raised. The Borg ship destroys a huge chunk of the Federation fleet, but we don't see the battle, and even as the Borg ship raises towards Sector 001, we don't get a true sense of the epic. That's because we only see what our main characters see, which means we're restricted to the *Enterprise*, to the occasional filtered message and view-screen horror, and to a few glimpses of Picard-as-Locutus hanging out with the Borg. Going by the rest of the series, none of this should be a surprise, and I don't hold it against the show that it didn't exponentially expand its horizons at the start of its fourth season. It's possible to raise a few legitimate criticisms of "Part 2," but by and large, this is a terrific conclusion to one of *TNG*'s brightest moments. It just feels like a little less because we've come up to the edge of what the show, with its budget and with the creative assumptions of the time, was capable of.

Still, it's impressive how seriously "Part 2" takes Picard's loss, and Riker's plan to rescue him and save Earth is nail-biting stuff. That the Borg use Picard's mind against his former comrades makes sense, although it's a hazy area. I'll buy them being able to predict the magic weapon, but given what Picard knows of Riker, I'm surprised they didn't take the time to destroy the *Enterprise* when they had the chance early on. The Borg are single-minded, yes, but Picard knows Riker won't be stopped so easily, and that means the Borg know it; they also know that the *Enterprise* is the best ship in the fleet. But OK, they want Earth, so however convenient it may be for our heroes

that their greatest enemies don't murder them while they're sitting ducks, I'll allow it. It's also odd that the Borg are taken relatively off-guard by Data and Worf's rescue mission, but at least here, the individual Borg fight back immediately on sensing the intruders.

Most of this episode is taken up with the climactic confrontation with the Borg cube, and it's some of the most exciting space action the series has ever done. By separating the saucer section from the rest of the ship, Riker successfully distracts the Borg long enough to wound them, by taking advantage of their greatest weakness, their collective will. This is not a race which understands bifurcation easily, and there's a great sense of pushing right up to the edges of what's possible, and then going further because, hell, what've we got to lose? Shelby's ascension to First Officer makes sense in context, though I'm not sure assigning someone new to the ship to the second highest position of command on the eve of the most dangerous battle anyone on board has ever faced makes *good* sense. And Riker's pre-game chat with Guinan gave us some interesting info on her relationship with Picard (OK, it just reminded us once again that there's a Big Mystery without actually confirming anything), but I'm not sure how relevant it was. It's a conversation that fits plausibly in the moment but that Riker so thoroughly ignores it can't help but look like wasted time in hindsight.

The highlight of the episode, apart from the space battle, is Picard's return to the *Enterprise*. Actually, screw the "apart." This is the good stuff right here. His first words as Locutus in Sick Bay are excellent reminders of the nature of the Borg threat; he assures those present that he won't harm them, he's just there to observe before their inevitable defeat, and there's no hostility or threat in his voice. (If Data, with his moral code and unflappable calm, represents the ideal qualities of computer-based intelligence, the Borg represent all that a lifetime of sci-fi movies and books have taught us to fear: no mercy, no sympathy, no passion. Just will.) Using Data to interface with the Borg part of Picard's consciousness is a cool variation on the traditional mind-meld, and the final solution to the threat, suggested by Picard, is clever and believable. That it comes from Picard himself is no surprise, but it's nice to have Riker's faith in the importance of a rescue mission paid off.

My favorite scene in the episode is its final one. Picard has been restored to the captain's chair, and why wouldn't he be? There will be some hurt feelings from people in the Federation who don't understand that the Borg got their information from him against his will, but he spent so little time as a half-machine, surely it's an experience he'll be able to put behind him as quickly as he does every adventure. And yet there are those bandages on his head, for wounds that haven't quite healed properly. And there's that final, wordless moment as the full impact of what happened to him comes clear. I'm sure we'll see more of this soon, but it's telling that the first we see of Picard after he's been re-humanized, he's cramming down the work as fast as he can. He has to keep moving, you see. The moment he stops, he's back on that ship, and he's lost in a thousand other faceless minds, his will perverted into the collective, his body a parody of efficiency and control. "Part 2" was an effective ending, and the two episodes as a whole are well-crafted, but for my money, its most powerful moments are also its most fleeting. The Borg came on his ship, and they stole him, and they changed him. He's back now, and they're dead, but something is lost forever. Peace of mind, perhaps. I doubt he'll be sleeping well soon.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- Debating the best approach to the Borg, Beverly raises the possibility of nanites. I believe this will become more relevant in the future.
- The Shut Up, Wesley Moment: Riker orders him to set a course to ram the Borg ship, and Wesley freaks out a little. Grow up, kid.

- You'll notice I didn't write about *Generations* this week. I'm easily swayed by the will of the collective. Also, I'm anal, and that means we won't be getting to any of the *TNG* movies till the end of this season, at which point I'll double up on *Generations* and *First Contact*. (I will then spend season 5 pretending that there are no other *TNG* movies, and hoping desperately you will believe me.)
- Next week, we pay a visit to "Family," and deal with some "Brothers."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Family"/"Brothers"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[11/18/10 10:00AM](#)

"Family"

Or The One Where Picard Goes Home

Nothing much happens in "Family." It's a direct continuation of "The Best of Both Worlds," but the Borg remain defeated. There's no new alien threat to handle, no strange crisis to unravel, no political infighting or diplomatic negotiations. There are three stories but no real plots. People talk, there's some fighting, a bit of hugging, and then it's over. This is the closest to straight drama that *TNG* has ever gotten, and two seasons ago, the idea of that would've scared the crap out of me. Good drama requires a certain amount of subtlety and nuance; it requires characters who are consistent, not necessarily in action but in their drives and core selves; and, God help us all, it requires subtext. That means sometimes people have to say things and mean something else entirely, and, apart from the occasional villain, that's not really something *TNG* used to do very well.

This isn't the first two seasons, though, and while it lacks the Earth-threatening stakes of the episode which precedes it, "Family" is one of the best hours *TNG* has ever done. Heartfelt, intimate, and wise, it's the sort of grace note that the epic maneuverings of "Both Worlds" required. The Borg's assimilation of Picard had a happy ending. Jean-Luc was restored to his humanity and his captaincy and even provided the key piece of information required to take down his attackers. And yet, the humiliation—the betrayal—lingered. What happened to Picard was a form of rape, and rape isn't something anyone gets over by working too much and drinking tea. Picard needs some time away from the *Enterprise*, with the loved ones he left behind to go traipsing across the galaxy. He needs to find some way to deal with whatever is breaking his heart.

The Picard segments of "Family" are the best parts of the episode, but what makes this one work as well as it does is that, by and large, there are no weak spots. While Picard is off in France, visiting the village where he grew up, life continues back on the ship. Worf's human parents, Helena and Sergey, come to visit—and of course they're Russian, which is just so perfect I couldn't stop grinning for most of their scenes. Worf is uncomfortable to have his parents around, which isn't surprising. If he was on a Klingon ship, there'd be no familial visits, but as Riker helpfully reminds us, the *Enterprise* isn't a Klingon ship. So here come Mom and Dad to nose around in everything, share embarrassing stories of Worf's youth, and maybe have a chat about that whole "shamed in front of the entire Klingon Empire" thing from last season.

The only other running story here takes up the least amount of screentime, but has the most surprisingly emotional pay-off. (Picard's story is more powerful, but the emotions there aren't quite as surprising; we know Patrick Stewart is going to deliver the goods, but Wesley isn't such a sure thing.) Beverly gets a delivery while the ship is orbiting Earth: a box full of her dead husband's things, including his old uniform, a book he sent her when he decided to propose, and a holographic recording of Jack's first—and, sadly, final—message to his son, made just after Wesley's birth. Beverly isn't sure at first if she should pass the recording along, but she decides to with a minimal amount of drama, and near the end of the episode, Wesley plays it in the holodeck. It works very well, tying together with the episode's loose theme about the importance of our ties to the people closest to us and how these connections are stronger than we realize, stronger even than death.

Worf's experiences are also moving, though not nearly as tragic. His parents aren't bad people; they aren't even really annoying people. That's to be expected, because *TNG* isn't a show about toxic families or complex psychological problems that can't be fixed through a simple application of honesty. Here, all the main characters are fundamentally decent people, and when conflict arises, it's nearly always about different conceptions of what's best for everyone. Greed or stupidity or malice are things that happen elsewhere. It's maybe a little naive, but there's something refreshing about it as well. The drama between Worf and his mom and dad comes from personality and insecurity, and all it really needs is a good heart-to-heart to fix everything. And it works, because we like Worf, and his parents seem very nice, and because it's satisfying to see characters we care about living through the minor crises that make up most of life. I'll admit it: Worf's smile near the end really got to me. Because, dammit, he sullied his honor for the sake of the Klingon Empire, and he deserves a little support for that.

It's also nice (or some other, less ridiculous word than "nice") to see characters we care about plowing through the major catastrophes, and that's what Picard's visit to Labarre is about, although he doesn't really understand this at first. Picard is running from his duties. His track-record is so unimpeachable that I doubt anyone (beyond the perpetually nosy Troi) would look askance on him asking for some time off, especially with what he's been through recently. And it's important that he leaves for a little while, but it's even more important that he decides to come back, and there's some time here where he doesn't seem to realize this. We meet Picard's family, most importantly his brother Robert (Jeremy Kemp), who is the only openly hostile relative in the entire episode. (And, so far as I can remember, the only one in the series proper, outside of Lore, whom we will be dealing with shortly.) Picard chats with his nephew, praises Robert's wife's cooking, and talks with an old friend about a potential job planet-side. He finds himself considering that last very seriously, which doesn't seem in character at all.

Robert doesn't like his brother that much. He calls him an "arrogant son of a bitch" behind his back, and the conversations between the two men are at icily polite at best, cutting and dismissive at worst. There are all kinds of old wounds here just below the surface, and impressively, those wounds don't immediately reveal their cause. Robert doesn't like technology, and considers Picard vain, but it's not till the two get drunk on wine that his jealousy of his younger brother becomes clear. This is a beautifully shot sequence, too, with Picard walking as fast as he can while Robert stalks him just behind, repeatedly assaulting him with accusations of ego and selfishness. The verbal assault

finally provokes Picard into lashing out physically, and the two wrestle for a few minutes before collapsing in laughter. And that's when the real reason for all of this becomes plain.

It's funny—Picard is the noblest character on a ship full of noble characters (only Data can match him for moral grace, and that's mostly because Data doesn't have a choice in what he is), but Robert's accusations of arrogance aren't entirely off the mark. Picard's ego isn't that he's selfish, though; it comes from a deep conviction that he has to be the best, the most perfect, the most ideal in all situations. He can't ever let himself be weak or foolish or cowardly, because that would mean failure, and that's not something this guy does. Which makes him a terrific role model and a wonderful lead, but it's also a lie, because no one can be that perfect. Picard is, after all, just a man under everything else, and there is something egotistical about his occasional refusal to admit this. (Which reminds me a little of Nicole Kidman in *Dogville*, which is not a comparison I ever thought I'd be making.) It takes his brother to bring him back down to earth long enough to admit that the Borg defeated him for a time, and he failed. Sure, it wasn't the kind of failure he should be ashamed of—the assimilation didn't leave him with many options—but that doesn't make his guilt and his self-loathing and despair any less real.

This confession, of all Stewart's amazing acting moments on the show so far, may be my favorite. There's none of the operatic intensity of "Sarek" here; it's just a man sobbing under the weight of his temporary damnation. "Family" is a necessary episode, as we all needed a breather after last week. It's also a remarkable episode, thoughtful, a little sad, but in the end full of hope. The final shot shows Picard's nephew dreaming under the stars. Like much of this episode, it could've been corny. And like all of this episode, it isn't.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- Guinan to Worf's parents: "He's not looking towards the Klingon Empire. He's looking towards you." Awwww.

"Brothers"

Or The One Where Data Goes Home

Hey, remember Lore? Last time we saw him was back in season one, which surprised me when I looked it up, because I thought he was on the show more often than that. Looking online, Lore only appears in four episodes of the series, which seems low to me. But hey, good to see him again, and since Brent Spiner was probably bored with the whole "two roles in one scene" gag, we meet a new character who's crucially important to Data and Lore: the cybernetics genius Dr. Noonien Soong, who created both androids and, last we heard, was dead. But this is a genre show, and on genre shows, unless we see the corpsification going down, the dead aren't exactly dead. (And even if we do see bodies hitting the floor, the collapse isn't always permanent.)

After easily the show's best premiere so far, and a second episode that managed to ease us into the rest of the season without losing the intensity or emotional realism, "Brothers" continues *TNG*'s win streak with a gratifyingly complex look at Data's past. It doesn't have quite the depth of "Family" or the scope of "Worlds," but both of those were series defining episodes. "Brothers" is more conventional, returning us to the standard mystery followed by confrontation followed by conclusion structure that most of the show operates on. The mystery here being: What the hell is going on with Data? In the space of about 10 minutes in show-time, he takes control of the *Enterprise*, forces the crew off the bridge, changes course for a new destination, and then beams himself down to an unknown planet, without help of any weapon beyond the ship's security tech and his own ability to perfectly mimic Picard's voice. So, clearly, something's going on.

Most of the big moments in this episode come from the second half in Soong's lab, but Data's assault on the ship is crackerjack (random confession: I get a ridiculous kick out of using that word) material, because it demonstrates what anyone who's been paying attention realized long ago: If Data didn't have those ethical subroutines in his positronic matrix, he would be a well-nigh unstoppable threat. Lore is dangerous because he has many of Data's abilities and none of Data's compunctions about harming innocents, but Lore is also tremendously unstable, and that makes him imperfect. Data, on the other hand, has real Skynet/Colossus potential, if he ever decided to give up on the full Pinocchio and get into business for himself. His ruthlessly pragmatic approach, combined with four years' worth of established trust, means that when the switch flips in his head, nobody is prepared to deal with it. Hell, they don't even realize Data is doing anything until he's already forced the bridge crew into Engineering. Geordi and O'Brien eventually manage a work-around to circumvent some of Data's installed protocols, but he's already in Soong's lab, mission accomplished, and the *Enterprise* is still basically useless to them without Data to provide the necessary access code. Imagine if he'd done this with actual harmful intent?

Ah, but none of this was Data's fault, of course. Our Data wouldn't dream of such things. Blame it on Soong, who, after years spent hiding, has finally decided to make contact with his greatest creation. Data has a "simple" homing device installed in his skull, which, once activated, creates an unignorable imperative to meet his maker. Interestingly enough, Soong doesn't seem like that bad a guy. We don't get to know much about him, beyond him being old and nearly dead, and that Brent Spiner looks odd under all that old age make-up. But he's proud of Data, and while his actions indicate a clear lack of consideration for others, it's not his fault that some stupid kid ate some stupid plant-life and will die if the *Enterprise* doesn't get back to a certain Starbase in time. (Here's a thought: maybe you should make the cure for eating a planet's flora available somewhere near the planet itself?) Soong is just another one of those nutty scientists who doesn't really think much for consequences. That's why he risks the stupid kid's life when he orders Data to hijack the ship, and that's why he's shocked when Lore walks in the front door.

In his defense, Lore was disassembled the last time Soong saw him, but after the *Enterprise* put him back together and after the poor psycho floated around in space for a couple of years following the conclusion of "Datalore," he's fully functional. (The Pakleds saved him, and he's even dressed in Pakled-esque garb.) He's also not too happy at what he considers his mistreatment at the hands of Soong and his brother. There are a couple ways the episode could've played this. Most obviously, it could've made Lore an outright villain. He was a bad one in "Datalore," partners with a crystalline entity that nearly devoured the *Enterprise*, so it only stands to reason he should be a bad one here. The best guess would be, he finds some way to betray Data again and beats up on Soong for leaving him behind.

This is what happens, but if that was all that happened, "Brothers" would be fine, but not much more than that. What makes this episode work well is that Lore is actually sympathetic. I'm not sure if Brent Spiner became a better actor since the first season, or if it's because the direction and writing have become that much stronger since the character's first appearance; I'm betting it's a little of both. Spiner does triple duty for a number of scenes in "Brothers," and he's credible in all three roles, but it's his work as Lore that's the most impressive. The character has gone from being an explosion of crazy, all creepy grins and mustache-twirling-worthy inneundo, into something more haunting and sad. He's more contained here than he ever was, and it's easier to connect with his emotional state, partly because of Spiner's performance, and partly because he's given understandable motivations. He's upset and hurt because he believes Soong mistreated him, and more importantly, he's right. It's not perfect—once Lore steals Data's uniform and gets the drop on Soong, the old one-note antics start to pop up again, although there's still enough justifiable rage behind them to make them mostly land. But the earlier scenes hold up very well and even achieve something I didn't think possible: They make you identify, if only for a moment, with Lore over Data.

"Brothers" is a generally tight piece of work, but like Lore's newfound complexity, it has some missteps. There's a transition in Soong's lab that feels like we're missing a scene. We don't need to see Lore knocking Data out and

stealing his uniform, but we do need a few more beats of that set-up than what we get. I'm not sure I buy that Data would be that easy to beat, especially now that he's on his guard, and I don't really understand why Soong would just go straight to installing the chip without checking to see where his other robot was hiding. Less damning but still flawed is the subplot involving the two brothers. Its symbolic meaning—forgiveness and so forth—has a place, but the plot itself, like the scenes with Beverly trying to cheer up the sick boy, isn't necessary or all that entertaining. (It's also another reminder why having children on a ship like this is tricky business at best.)

Still, I do like that final scene, as Data considers what it means to have a brother and what he might do the next time he sees Lore. Throughout the episode, Soong repeatedly encourages Data to have sympathy for Lore, and while this could be dismissed as the scientist's hopeless naiveté—Lore does throw him across the room after stealing his latest invention, after all—the episode's conclusion seems to give the urge towards reconciliation a certain legitimacy. Lore is a monster, but it is literally the fault of his design. Like Frankenstein's creation, he was feared by those around him, and then dismissed by his creator as hopelessly flawed. He's imperfect, dangerous, and surely doomed. But he's the only brother Data will ever have, and maybe that means something.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- I wonder how long it took Geordi to scan Data for any other secret surprises once they got back to the *Enterprise*?
- They still have toy dinosaurs in the future that look about the same as the toy dinosaurs I had growing up. This pleases me.
- Next week, we lift up our head, wipe off our mascara, and take a look at "Suddenly Human" and "Remember Me."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Suddenly Human"/"Remember Me"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[11/25/10 10:00AM](#)

"Suddenly Human"

Or The One Where Picard Gets A Roommate Who Majors In Stabbing

I'm all for Picard-centric storylines, and "Suddenly Human" makes good use of the character's on-going issues with children, but it's odd that Worf wasn't more involved with the plot. Jono, the human boy adopted by a Talarian starship captain after the Talarians kill the boy's parents, isn't exactly in the same situation as the Klingon, but it's close enough that I'm surprised Troi didn't try and force the two to bond through their shared experiences. Troi is a big one for forcing that sort of behavior on people. I think she just gets bored wandering around the ship in her absurdly low-cut uniform, so when a crisis occurs that requires her expertise, she just goes full puppet-master and starts pulling the strings for her own amusement. Perhaps Worf had displeased her; perhaps his gruff, straightforward manner was unresponsive to her psychological meddling. Whatever the reason (and yes, there is a reasonable plot explanation for this), when Jono needs someone to lean on in his time of crisis, Troi turns to Picard. Who gets all sputtery.

If you ever want definitive proof that *TNG* has gone from being a weak show with strong elements, to just being strong overall, well, you could watch any one of at least half a dozen classics we've gone through in the past few weeks. "Human" isn't quite the same level as, say, "Yesterday's Enterprise," but it is very, very good, and one of the reasons it's so impressive is that it takes a subject that could've been mishandled in any number of ways and manages to stick the landing perfectly. The *Enterprise* finds a damaged ship with five people on board. Four of them are Talarian men; the fifth is a human. Our heroes soon determine that the human has surviving family back on Earth, and they decide it's their job to bring Jono back to his "real" family. Also, they don't really trust the Talarians, and Beverly finds the boy has been injured in such a way that leads everyone to assume child abuse.

Imagine how this would've been handled earlier in the show's run. Contemplate that for a moment on the Tree of Woe. It definitely would've been child abuse, that's for sure, and Picard would've gotten closer to the young man, ultimately convincing him to betray his adopted culture for the inherently superior human one, right before Picard would give a speech about how great humanity is and how a person's heritage would eventually shine through. Something like that, anyway. There would've been no question that Jono belonged back on Earth, however long he'd spent with his new "dad," and that dad would've almost certainly been a villain. Maybe it wouldn't have been that bad, but I can't imagine it being much good, because in the early going, *TNG* lacked the courage of its convictions. It wanted to see the crew of the *Enterprise* triumphant, not chastened, and in order for "Human" to work, Picard and the others ... well, they have to be *wrong*.

There's a great scene two-thirds of the way through the episode which is mostly great because of what follows immediately after it. Picard brings the gradually thawing Jono to Ten-Forward, where they meet Riker, Wesley, and Data. Wesley is enjoying a banana split, and he offers it to Jono, with a typically dorky Wesley comment. Jono fails to master the complicated art of consuming soft fruit and frozen milk, and splatters a large portion of the dessert on Wesley. Riker starts laughing, and Wesley, and then Picard, and Jono, relieved, join in. Later, at the bar, Picard and Riker talk about how far Jono has come since his rescue, the implication being that he'll be fitted into a Starfleet uniform himself soon enough.

Next scene (or thereabouts): Jono wakes up in the middle of the night from troubled sleep, sneaks into Picard's room, and stabs him in the chest.

It's not a nightmare, it's not a fantasy sequence, and while we don't see the knife connect, we do see the results; this isn't a commercial break fake-out, where we come back and find that Jono has merely gutted a mattress. Good old Jono, who keens to mourn, plays a good game of space racquetball, and is occasionally troubled by horrible, mind-wrenching memories of his past, attacks Picard, who has been nothing but kind to him. It's a shocking moment in an episode that had generally seemed to be playing the safe game: Jono's "rehabilitation" from the Talarian experience was going apace, and while yes, his adoptive father, Endar, was threatening to start a war if his son wasn't returned to him, that was the sort of plot complication that could easily be worked around. Hell, "Human" even provides a possible solution: Jono is at the age of decision, which means that it's time for him to start calling his own shots, which means that, were he to tell Endar and the others to take a hike, a hike would be taken by them, post haste.

That's not what happens, though, and the assault on Picard is one of the reasons that Picard ultimately realizes he's been approaching the problem in the wrong way. Up until this, "Human" wasn't a bad episode. Picard's efforts to connect with the boy, Troi's insistence that he do so despite Picard's clear reluctance, Jono's odd behavior—they're all beats we've seen on the show before, but given how solid the ensemble is clicking by now, it was entertaining enough. Endar's appearance, and his non-creeapazoid status, starts amping up the ambiguity, but it isn't till Picard's final speech that the episode turns from an enjoyable but somewhat rote exercise in social reintegration into something much more satisfying. After an hour in which every human character on the show is determined to force Jono to do what they think is right, Picard finally acknowledges that Jono is old enough to make his own choices, and clearly, he's made his choice, at least for now.

Today's two-fer is going to be a little shorter than usual, as it's my vacation week, and I've got some serious Thanksgiving to get up to. Thankfully, neither of these episodes really requires a whole lot of unpacking. "Human" is by far the superior of the two, though. It's always a good sign when a show is willing to let its leads be occasionally wrong. *TNG* is not an anti-hero drama like *The Sopranos* or *The Shield*. Picard and the rest of his team are unquestionably decent and brave and true. But without the occasional lapses into arrogance or anger or cultural blindness their heroism is cheapened into something tinny and without cost. Picard learns the right lesson here and sends Jono back home. Their final parting, with Jono embracing the captain with the same gesture he used to

embrace his father earlier (and even removing a glove before he does it) is beautifully done, right down to the slightly haunted look on Picard's face. But that moment wouldn't be worth as much if it hadn't taken a gaping chest wound to achieve it.

Grade: A-

Stray Observations:

- Chad Allen plays Jono. He was one of Jane Seymour's kids on *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. I have nothing to add to that.
- It could be a cheat that Jono is unable to kill a defenseless, sleeping Picard, but I'll give it a pass.
- "You're probably not aware of this, but I've never been particularly comfortable around children."
- Space racquetball: lame or lamest?

"Remember Me"

Or The One Where Beverly Keeps Losing Track Of ... Er ... Where Was I?

A story always needs to be a few steps ahead of its audience. That doesn't necessarily mean the characters have to be; some of the best stories ever told featured protagonists with, at best, a dim understanding of their circumstances. But the consciousness behind the tale needs to be aware of both what the audience knows directly and what they've almost certainly been able to piece together on their own. As audiences become increasingly savvy to the tricks of the genre trade, their comprehension becomes harder to judge. It's crucial, though. If you assume the audience understands more than they actually do, you risk alienating them and losing their emotional investment. If you underestimate them, though, you run the risk of boring them to tears.

It's the latter which gave me problems during "Remember Me," which features Beverly Crusher trying to solve the mystery of the rapidly disappearing *Enterprise* crew. The episode has its merits. The introduction of the central mystery is done with an admirable casualness, and the idea of people vanishing so entirely that every record of their existence vanishes with them is one of those collective nightmare style concepts that always has some potency, no matter how poorly handled. And while the execution leaves a little to be desired, it's nice to see The Traveler return, last having been seen in "Where No One Has Gone Before," aka, one of the first episodes of the show that wasn't terrible. We haven't had a traditional crazy-sci-fi-shit-happens ep in a little while, and I'm always a sucker for those. Unfortunately, there isn't enough story here to really carry a full hour, at least not as presented here, and because of that, we spend too much time waiting for Beverly and the show to catch up with us.

It's fun to have a Beverly episode again, though, isn't it? And we know it's a Beverly episode right away, because her log sets the scene. The *Enterprise* is at a Starbase, and Beverly is welcoming an old friend on board, her mentor Dr. Quaiice. The doctor's wife died recently, and he's decided he needs a change of scenery; he also reminds Beverly the importance of staying connected to the people we love, which is important because otherwise when it came time to create a magical new universe she might've made up something involve leotards. Quaiice's Pep-Talk of Imminent Doom also inspires the good doctor to go visit Wesley in Engineering. Things are surprisingly tense; Geordi is actually snappish, which is not a quality you usually see in him. Wesley's doing some crazy warp bubble magic thing, and while Beverly watches, there's a flash of purple light. Wesley doesn't understand what it means, and by the time he thinks to look, Beverly is gone.

Now, it's very possible that one could watch this scene and not immediately realize the light caused Beverly to disappear. I'll be honest, I didn't catch it. Soon after, we see her paying a visit to Dr. Quaiice's quarters, only to find he (and his belongings) have vanished. There's no indication there's anything wrong with the ship or that Beverly herself is in danger (beyond the general sense that people disappearing isn't really good for anyone's health), and

that's the best way to play this kind of twist; don't draw attention to it at all. I'm sure there are some clever folks who realized what was happening, but that's to be expected. There's always going to be someone who can see through a plot twist. That doesn't mean you shouldn't ever try to surprise anyone else.

The problem comes when, after Quaique fails to show himself and Data can find no record of the doctor in the computer, Picard takes Beverly to Engineering, and Wesley explains how he was working on this warp bubble, but they hadn't been able to stabilize it. Beverly theorizes that Quaique may have been trapped in the bubble, but no one suggests that it might have been Beverly herself that was trapped. This is because everyone else in the bubble apart from Beverly is a construct she created, and if she doesn't know something, they won't know it. Since Beverly is a doctor, I suppose it's only natural that she would assume that she would assume everyone else was sick and she was fine or something like that.

However, most everyone else watching at home will have figured out that Beverly is the source of the disturbance, and that furthermore, this isn't the "real" *Enterprise*. So we spend the next fifteen minutes watching as the problem escalates, hoping that she'll ask the most obvious question, and getting increasingly uninterested when she doesn't. At least, that's how my experience went. Having the ship's crew disappear is a lot less creepy when you're fairly sure none of them were really around at all (I mean, beyond the standard sense of them being fictional constructs), and the fact that the disappearances never vary turns it into a waiting game. Sooner or later, she'll realize what's going on, and then the next phase of the plot can kick in. Until then, we're stuck with second verse, same as the first.

What's odd is that when the episode does finally change its game-plan and let us in on the secret we already know, that doesn't fix the problem. Or rather, it fixes one problem but creates new ones to replace it. Beverly keeps seeing this strange light, and she believes it's dangerous, when in fact, it's a connection between the warp reality and the actual reality. Wesley and Geordi are struggling to re-create their experiment to bring her home and failing. It's only when the Traveler himself puts in an appearance that they manage to create a link that lasts long enough to work, and even that's a near thing.

It should be suspenseful, and there's drama in the idea of Beverly fighting against the one thing that could save her. In cutting away from Beverly, though, the ep loses one of its main points of interest: her increased isolation, and her horror at not knowing what's happening. It's strange, because showing us the real ship is basically putting us on the same page as the show, which is what I wanted, and yet I mostly just found myself wishing we could focus on Beverly again. It doesn't help that the Traveler is really not that great of a character; his nonsensical Zen platitudes sounded refreshingly simple in season one, but here, they just play like a sad *Star Wars* rip-off, and the less said about Wesley's gifts with the Force, the better.

"Remember" isn't terrible. Gates McFadden really gives it her all, and I liked her big monologue on the bridge near the end as she tries to logic her way out of her problem. The image of the ship disappearing around her is terrific, as is the way Wesley vanishes. Turn a corner, and he's gone. Because of a certain level of stalling and because it brought in some old plotting best left forgotten, the episode fails to live up to its concept. It's passable entertainment, but, if you'll pardon the pun, ultimately forgettable.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- Okay, so I guess this week's review wasn't *that* short. Happy Thanksgiving, everyone!
- Next week, we look at "Legacy" and "Reunion."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Legacy"/"Reunion"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[12/02/10 10:00AM](#)

"Legacy"

Or The One Where We Find Out Where Tasha Yars Are Made

Out of everyone in the *Enterprise* crew, Data and Tasha had the most potential for back-story in the first season. Data was unique, his origins mysterious, and, hey, who doesn't love a robot? Tasha was more problematic; as a character, she was impulsive and emotionally unstable, and it never really made sense that she'd risen to her position of authority on the *Enterprise*, since it was hard to believe she could keep a cool head in a snowstorm, let alone during the delicate diplomatic entanglements the ship was prone to stumble upon. Maybe she would've become more credible as the show went on or maybe she would've faded into the background like Troi, existing primarily to remind us that hey, women still totally exist in the future, and many of them have jobs.

However it might've gone down if Yar hadn't run into the Oil Slick Monster, we can only speculate, but I can promise you, sooner or later the show would've found a way to get back to Tasha's home-planet. Because that's what happens when a series runs long enough: Histories are developed, and when you've got a history like Tasha's, full of "rape gangs," (I still can't decide if that phrase is ridiculously horrible or horribly ridiculous) and whatever violence and chaos made her the catalog of dysfunction we met in "Encounter At Farpoint," sooner or later, you've got to go back. An episode like "Legacy" was inevitable if Yar had continued on the series, and even without her around, the dramatic potential remains. As we saw in "Yesterday's Enterprise," Tasha is far more interesting in death than she ever was in life, so it makes sense to try and mine a little more pathos out of the lingering remains of her memory.

After a crew poker game that turns out to be surprisingly thematically relevant to the rest of the story, the *Enterprise* goes into full rescue mood; the *Arcos*, a Federation ship, is in grave danger, and only our heroes are

near enough to offer any hope of rescue. They still arrive too late to beam anyone off the ship before it explodes, but thankfully, the surviving crew made use of their ship's escape pod and fled. Less thankfully, the pod crash-landed on Turkana IV, Tasha Yar's birthplace, and by all accounts, not a very nice place to visit or live. The survivors make the understandable mistake of heading to the nearest colony and get immediately grabbed by one of Turkana's two ruling factions, the Alliance. (The name is longer than that, but one gets the impression that the specifics don't count for much here. There are two groups, and neither is very nice.) When Riker and an away team beam down to the planet, they find a bunch of locals engaged in what might be the most deadly game of Laser Tag ever. They're picked by the Coalition, who offer to help, for a price. Riker huffily refuses, the away team beams back to the ship, and that's when the Coalition leader busts out his big gun: Ishara Yar, Tasha's sister.

"Legacy" works fairly well, even if Turkana never seems all that deadly. The existence of the Coalition and the Alliance is supposed to explain this; everyone has proximity detectors installed in their chests, so they can't get too close to the opposing side, which means all kinds of running around, but a lot less of the rape gangs. Even with that in mind, there's nothing so vicious or unsettling here that it wouldn't seem to fit with half a dozen other planets the *Enterprise* has visited in the past. Despite the connection to Tasha, we never get much sense of her history here. They remember her name, and Ishara has her share of issues over her sister, but mentioning Yar at the beginning is more a way to shorthand us into this environment than a connection that has serious consequences. We know about as much about Tasha's past coming out as we did going in: It sucked.

Really, though, that isn't a mark against the episode, because unlike "Yesterday's Enterprise," Tasha wasn't the point here. The point was more seeing how Data would connect to someone with a similar past as his lost lover (yeah, I'm never going to forget that "fully functional" scene, as long as I'm around, you won't either), and seeing how Ishara would handle the possibility of a better life as presented by the *Enterprise*. For a while, she appears to be won over by the camaraderie she sees and how pleasant everyone is and how there's food and nobody's getting shot in the face. She changes into the standard, extremely embarrassing unitard look that civilians are apparently required by law to wear on a starship, and she has her proximity detector removed to supposedly help with the big rescue mission. She kisses Data on the cheek.

It's all an act, though, or at least it mostly is. In keeping with the end of "Suddenly Human," we once again see our heroes trying to rescue someone from a potentially dangerous culture, and once again, that someone rejects the aid. This is a pretty big jump from the first couple seasons, when it seemed like Star Fleet was the best possible answer to any question asked. Unlike in "Human," though, Picard and the others don't come off looking foolish for trying to force their ways on a stranger. Ishara is playing them, and when her betrayal is revealed, she's the one who seems more than a little ridiculous. The Coalition and Alliance war doesn't have much point to it that we can see, just people killing each other to kill each other. Ishara stays true to her culture, not because her culture is healthy or worth protecting, but because when you've spent your whole life stuck in idiotic misery, you start believing there's something noble in what you do. You have to.

The main reason Ishara comes off as the loser here, apart from the fact that her plans come to naught, is that she spends most of her time on the *Enterprise* bonding with Data, and it's Data who first realizes what she's up to. He's advocated for her to Picard, arguing that she should be allowed to leave Turkana IV after the survivors of the *Arcos* are rescued, and when he discovers her using their foray into enemy territory as an opportunity to take out the Alliance's shields, he has every right to be angry and hurt. Of course he isn't, because this is Data; even if he's developing emotional responses over time (and the last shot of the episode strongly implies this), he's still not prone to over-reacting to protect his ego. So he reacts calmly and logically to what's happening, while Ishara panics and demands he leave her alone. In the end, Ishara is returned to her people, and Data is left confused over his apparent inability to read people's behavior. He's gotten good enough to know when Riker is bluffing during their poker games, and he shouldn't be vulnerable to emotional appeal or seduction. But for Data, all behavior needs to make

sense, and human behavior so rarely does. "Legacy" isn't an amazing episode. We never really get a sense of how Turkana's political structure works, and the proximity detectors are more a neat-sounding phrase than a necessary plot device. But Data's misplaced trust makes for a solid conclusion.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- Well, there is some stuff in there about Ishara despising her sister for abandoning her and her eventually coming round to respecting her sister, but I dunno. I think my biggest problem with this episode is that it never seems specific in the right ways.
- Beth Toussaint plays Ishara. She does fine with what she's given, and she has a certain Linda Hamilton-y quality going.
- Nice to see that Turkana is still getting regular hairspray deliveries.
- The moment the proximity detectors were introduced, I was expecting some sort of ironic reveal before the end. So points for not going there, I guess.
- Line from my notes, taken out of context: "God, Troi is annoying."

"Reunion"

Or The One Where It's A (Klingon) Boy

Is this our first Worf episode of the season? I believe it is! Plus our introduction to Worf's son, Alexander, and the return (and, sadly, final appearance) of Worf's lost love, K'Ehleyr. And oh hey, here's Duras again, last seen being an all around jerkwad in "Sins of the Father." In fact, "Reunion" is something of a sequel to "Sins," as it carries on the runner that the Klingon Empire is slowly collapsing in on itself, and the honor and codes Worf adheres to so faithfully have largely become a way of masking internal corruption and greed. K'mpec (also last seen in "Sins"), functional ruler of the Klingon Empire, is dying, and someone's going to have to take his place. Normally this would be an internal matter; there are two strong contenders for the position of leader, and, since we're talking Klingons, T'wee'dledum and T'wee'dledee have to have a battle to see who gets top spot. It's just, well, K'mpec isn't dying of old age or the Klingon equivalent of prostate cancer. He's been poisoned, and one of the candidates is responsible.

Which brings us to K'Ehleyr, who meets with the *Enterprise* on K'mpec's request. She's acting as a liaison to bring Picard into the conflict; while Picard's last encounter with the Klingon high command didn't really end in good vibes, he's clearly a man of integrity, and if I needed someone to solve my murder and save my people from chaos, Picard would be on the short-list. (And since Santa is generally busy this time of year, Picard would probably be at the top of that list.) K'Ehleyr has her own motives, though. We haven't seen her since she and Worf hooked up in "The Emissary," but apparently, that hook-up resulted in a pregnancy, which resulted in a son named Alexander which Worf knew nothing about. And now he does, but since he's shamed himself in the Empire, he can't directly acknowledge his son's lineage, as that would put Alexander in danger of being shamed himself. Family is difficult.

"Reunion" tries to do a bunch of things, and most of them are successful. It's good to see more movement on the slow collapse of the Klingon political system; *TNG* still isn't really big on long-running story arcs, but it does a good job at keeping plates spinning in the background. "Sins" is a season ago, but "Reunion" does a good job at bringing you up to speed if you aren't crazy enough to be watching the whole series from beginning to end. The events here represent a somewhat substantial jump in plotting—when we last saw Duras and K'mpec, they were collaborating to pin blame on Worf's dead father and hold the Empire together, and now K'mpec is dying and Duras is vying to take his place—but the jump doesn't feel incongruous. Duras was a bastard then and a bastard now, and his alliance with

K'mpec was based more on greed for power than any concern for stability in government. If we're not going to spend a lot of time focusing on Worf's storylines, this is the best way to handle them; just show us the important bits.

The episode also deals with Worf's relationship with K'Ehleyr and how he handles meeting Alexander. This also works well, although it feels a little short-changed in the end, especially for K'Ehleyr. Her complicated relationship with her Klingon heritage was one of the driving forces behind her character in "Emissary," and while I buy that she might eventually come around to admitting her love for Worf (c'mon, it's *Worf*.), the transition here, from meeting, to the expected tensions, to her confession that she needs him, happens fast. Worf's scenes with his son are terrific, the few we get, and my problems with tempo here (which, admittedly, aren't even my major criticism of the episode) could more be a factor applying current television drama standards to older models. In terms of early '90s TV, where major relationship shifts were dictated by what guest stars appeared when, this isn't that unusual. I just enjoy watching these two spar so much that I wish we could've seen more of it. As is, the Klingon political issues and the mystery of K'mpec's killer get more screentime; these are the big ticket items of the episode, so to speak, but I wouldn't have minded shaving off a little of these scenes for some more time with the doomed lovers. (Although I wouldn't want to lose a minute of the Ritual of Poking The Dead Guy With The Cattle Prod. That was awesome.)

My biggest concern with "Reunion" is K'Ehleyr's death. It's a cheap way to go out. After Worf refuses to marry her because he can't bear to have her and Alexander share his shame, K'Ehleyr starts poking around into just what happened back in "Sins." She's a smart woman, and, after both Worf and Picard refuse to answer her questions, she quickly determines the computer files she needs to understand the situation. But by trying to access these particular files, she sets off an alarm that only Duras and his men hear. Duras comes to her quarters, they have a confrontation, and the next we see, Worf and Alexander enter her rooms to find her battered, bloody, and dying.

It's a shocking scene, and a moving one, as K'Ehleyr reaches out to her son for one last exchange. But I also can't help feeling it's a little cheap. K'Ehleyr is, again, a smart woman, and she's also a warrior; we saw her kicking a fair share of ass in "Emissary." That she would allow Duras into her quarters without any means of defending herself is a stretch, and that she would be so easy to murder (yeah, the coffee table's wrecked, but next time we see Duras, he doesn't seem to have much in the way of visible wounds), smacks of contrivance, and worse, it turns a strong character into just a victim whose death has to be avenged. If K'Ehleyr had to die (and I can accept that she did) we should've seen the fight scene, and it should've been a *fight*, not just the assault that's implied here. Or else have Duras kill her by cheating, much as he does K'mpec. As is, it plays a little too much like K'Ehleyr got in over her silly, soon to be caved in head, and that's doesn't sit well.

I wasn't initially sold on Duras being the poisoner, either; it seemed too easy that the Klingon so responsible for Worf's social humiliation would conveniently put himself in a position where he had to be put down. But sometimes a bad guy is just a bad guy, and narrative twists aren't always necessary to make a story work. (Although even if he is innocent of killing K'mpec, Gowran is one seriously freaky looking guy. Are there Klingon heroin addicts?) Plus, it was righteous enough to see Worf finally get to take the creep down in the end. I can't remember the last time we saw Worf getting to do some serious damage to someone, and his "K'Ehleyr was my mate" is a great moment, whatever compromises were necessary to get there.

TNG is generally not big on vengeance, but apparently they were willing to make an exception in Worf's case. When Riker orders him to stop, he ignores the order and kills Duras quite dead, and while Picard gives a big speech about how he's disappointed in Worf for his actions and that an official reprimand will appear on Worf's record, it's impossible to believe that he made the wrong choice. It's odd, really, how unambiguous this episode is. Duras, the guy we want to be the villain, is the villain, and when he does the unthinkable, he gets take down in immensely satisfying fashion. Sure, Worf is still not quite able to clear his family name yet, but it's only a matter of time; "Reunion" lacks some of "Sins" punch, because most of the hard choices are made for our heroes, instead of the

other way around. Still, it's very good, and Alexander manages not to wear out his welcome in the few scenes he's given. And whatever it took to get there, the final scene between father and son is melancholy, honest, and hopeful, and that's not a bad mix to make.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Sad as I am to see her go, I'm happy I'll never have to type K'Ehleyr again.
- I like how willing Picard is to force his crew into embarrassing personal situations. It's like he's getting revenge for every time anyone laughed at his reaction to Lwaxana Troi.
- Next week, we look at "Future Imperfect" and "Final Mission."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Future Imperfect"/"Final Mission"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[12/09/10 10:00AM](#)

"Future Imperfect"

Or The One In Which We Find Out What To Get The Will Who Has Everything

Judging by the comments, the consensus is that I was too hard on "Remember Me" a couple weeks ago, and you may be right. Reviews aren't objective, much as we might like to pretend they are; those grades look solid, but if you get in close, you can see right through them. A write-up is as close as I can come to describing and explaining my reaction to a given episode, which means that they aren't always as clear as I'd like them to be. Even when they are, there's no guarantee that I'll be in the right mood to get the most out of what I'm seeing, or that my own personal prejudices won't blind me from appreciating a story's particular virtues. These reviews are meant to create discussion and to provide a consistent critical perspective on an influential series; when people don't agree with me, well, that's what the comments section is for. (It goes without saying that these reviews have, like, the bestest comments section on the Internet.)

I say this not to try and excuse my opinion, but because watching "Future Imperfect," I was struck by how conceptually similar it was to "Remember Me" and by how much more I enjoyed this ep than I did "Remember." And I wonder how much of that stems from my own prejudices and how much is some definable increase in quality. My main problem with Bev's story is that I get bored when a show keeps hitting the same notes over and over; as unsettling as it was that people kept disappearing around her (Wesley's disappearance was one of the creepiest moments the series has ever done), there really wasn't a second act. More people disappeared, Beverly continued to be the only one noticing, and the situation didn't really change until the final 15 minutes.

There's a little more going on in "Imperfect," much to the episode's credit. It should be obvious from the start that Riker's jump forward in time (16 years into the future, to be exact) is nonsense, just as the people vanishing on Beverly's *Enterprise* weren't really disappearing. Between *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*, shows have developed a willingness in the past few years to play around with time in ways whose effect lasts longer than the episode at hand, but *TNG* isn't really a show about risk taking. Even if it was, it's hard to think of a series that would be willing to jump 16 years in the middle of its fourth season. So obviously, *something* strange was going on, and whatever it was didn't jibe with the explanation future-Beverly gave about a retrovirus attaching to Riker's DNA and causing massive memory loss, just 'cause.

What makes "Imperfect" better, in my mind, than "Remember," is how it plays with your expectations. While no one breaks the fourth wall to wink at the audience, we're obviously supposed to be suspicious about Riker's revised circumstances from the start. The episode begins with Riker's birthday party (Troi appears to have raided Katy Perry's Closet O' Laytex for her outfit here), signaling he'll be the focal point of the episode, and reminding us how much everybody likes him. While this is going on, the *Enterprise* is probed by a planet with no discernible life signs. There may be a secret Romulan base involved, however, so Riker, Worf, and Geordi beam down to Alpha Onais III to investigate. Their location is immediately overwhelmed by methane gas, and when the transporter tech tries to beam everyone to safety, she has trouble locking in on their signals. Riker collapses, and we cut to him waking up in Sick Bay, graying at the temples.

So Beverly gives her reasons for what happened, and it's vaguely plausible. Riker is now the captain of the *Enterprise*, which is surely something he's wanted deep down for a long time (why else would he keep refusing transfers to captain other ships?), and many of his friends are still around. Picard's gone Admiral, and he's even grown a goatee. The ladies all have their hair pinned up, so as to appear more matronly, I guess. Riker has a dead wife and a live son, and both pieces of information are difficult to take easily. Then there are the Romulans. Riker's informed that some years ago (back in the dead zone of his brain), the *Enterprise* rescued a crippled Romulan ship when it entered Federation territory. The Romulans were so impressed that they agreed to get down to finally brokering peace negotiations. So Riker's a hero to, well, all of the civilized universe or nearly, and now it's time for the historic signing of the historic documents, and his presence is required, even if his brain is swiss cheese. Funny thing, though; When the Romulan ambassador beams over to the *Enterprise*, it turns out to be our old friend Tomalak. Odd coincidence that he's involved, wouldn't you say?

In fact, all of this seems to be built on odd coincidences, and what makes it work is that it never feels like Riker's ability to understand his situation is held back in order to fill out the running time. We're supposed to be suspicious of all this, of the fact that so many original crew-members are still around. The *Enterprise* seems like a great place to work, but 16 years is a long time. Why is Geordi still running Engineering? Why is Worf stuck at the helm? It's telling that the changes are all the sort of changes that would have immediate emotional meaning; Geordi having real eyes or Data being Riker's First Officer mean something to Will right off, because these are people he's connected to in his regular life. For the most part, we don't get the new personnel one would expect if this really were nearly decades down the road. There aren't any unfamiliar faces moved into prominent roles, even though there should be. (Take a look at your own life. You may still know some of the same people you knew 16 years ago, but those people don't make up your entire world anymore.)

So here we are, thinking we're really clever because we know something strange is going on here, and then Picard and Troi arrive in a Romulan Bird of Prey and seem to deliver the answer into our hands. The Romulans are willing to sign the treaty, but one of the requirements is that the Federation divulge the location of Outpost 23, a spot that used to be lodestone of Starfleet's defenses in the Neutral Zone. Riker objects, and Picard explains that things have changed significantly in the time Riker forgets, and that the outpost is no longer strategically relevant. Which is awfully convenient, isn't it, especially with Tomalak hanging around. Odd that the Romulan ambassador would be

someone the *Enterprise* has such a troubled history with. So, again, because of the cleverness, we assume all this future imperfection is a Romulan attempt to trick Riker into divulging key information. When Riker watches video of his dead wife and recognizes "Min" as "Minuet," the holographic ideal woman from back in season one, we're surprised at how he figured it out but not by what he figured out.

It's a great scene, too. I especially like the relish with which Riker tells "Picard" to shut up. Then Tomalak ends the program, and we're all, like, "A-ha! I knew it! That jerkface," because this is what we were expecting. At least, this is what I was expecting. Sure, there's ten minutes left in the episode, but surely that can be given over to Riker struggling to find a way to escape his captors. And it sort of is, until Riker meets up with the young boy who played his son. The son's name was Jean-Luc, the boy's real name is Ethan, and he's *Star Trek's* version of Newt from *Aliens*, small, scared, and desperate to escape. So desperate that Riker doesn't even realize he's being played again till "Ethan" slips up.

See, this I was not expecting. "Imperfect" would've been a solid episode without the final twist. There's enough curiosity in finding out just how Riker's future differs from his present to make the first two-thirds interesting even once you realize it's all imaginary (er, more imaginary than usual, I mean), and it's interesting trying to figure out just why we see what we see, once we realize it's supposed to be part of his own fantasy. (Kind of funny that Troi isn't his wife.) The final twist gives it an extra edge for me. I can see people not liking it because it's sort of corny and because it relies once again on magical alien technology. But what saves it is that the technology is ultimately impotent. Riker sees through both ruses eventually, and I like to think that the reason "Ethan," aka Barash, is so lonely is that he, too, can't believe in what the machines show him for very long. This isn't really godlike. His race is dead, his mother sacrificed herself to save him, and now, he's stuck on a rock with pretty pictures that can't help but break his heart. I'm not sure the episode quite earns the pathos, but I liked it.

Grade: A-

Stray Observations:

- I love how Picard delivers his line: "Mr. Data, we must hurry or we'll miss Commander Riker's party." I can't really explain why, but I do.
- So, it's more than a little weird that the woman Riker dreams of most passionately never really existed, right? (Also telling how even in the future, wives are referred to as "Mrs. [Husband's name here]." Unless that's just one more sign this is all Riker's fantasy.)
- The way you can tell when Riker finally gets to the heart of what's going on: For the first time since he passed out on the planet, the episode cuts away from Riker and back to what's happening on the ship.

"Final Mission"

Or The One Where Wesley Leaves

Late in the episode, Wesley and Picard are trapped on a strange planet, hiding from the overpowering sun in a cave where the only water is guarded by a powerful and inexplicable energy force. Picard is seriously injured, possibly dying, and Wesley is freaking out a little. To try and reach the captain, and because when somebody might be dying is usually a good time to tell them things you need them to know, Wesley confesses that the reason he's striven so hard in recent years, to excel at his studies, to prove himself on board the *Enterprise*, to get into Starfleet Academy, was to impress Picard. He wanted Jean-Luc, the closest thing to a father he has anymore, to be proud of him. It's the moment of honesty much of this episode has been building to, and it should be a powerful reminder of the bond these two share.

And all I'm thinking is, Jesus, what a fucking *tool*.

"Final Mission" marks Wesley's departure from the show. I have no doubt he'll be back for occasional guest turns, but for now, at least, he's headed back to the Academy, and there's no ill-timed rescue mission to block his way. Before he goes, he's given one last storyline to indicate that he's well on the path to manhood and to give his relationship with Picard a satisfying note to close on. It's also one of the first episodes I've seen that manages to balance two unconnected storylines, the Wesley/Picard plot and the struggle to pull a radioactive garbage ship into an asteroid belt before it kills a lot of people, without losing momentum in either. It's nice to see Wesley getting another arc, especially one that uses his super genius in a way that doesn't make him infuriatingly precocious. So, this was strong overall, nothing hugely flashy, but good, grounded character writing, and well-realized science fiction.

I'm not kidding, though, about not caring much for Wesley's big confessional scene. There's something off-putting about how he says, about the naked emotional greed of what he's driving at. Instead of clarifying and strengthening a bond between a young man and his mentor, it reminded me instead of the machine Wesley developed in the first season (I think) that let him recreate Picard's voice saying whatever he wanted to hear. This isn't healthy, what we're seeing here. At this point in his life, Wesley should be doing things more because they build his ego than because he really wants some bald dude to love him. (Unless, y'know, that's his thing. In which case, I'm sorry, I think I broke my mind a little.) There have been positive signs in this regard earlier in the season; the character has been more confident, he's been, on occasion, a little dickish, he's condescended to his mother, all things that are a normal part of getting older and becoming your own person. But here, for this one scene, he's a mess.

Obviously the writers aren't pushing for ambiguity with Wesley's big speech. Picard doesn't indicate any shock or horror at the adulation, instead taking it in stride as the expected cornerstone of their interactions. I probably should too. This is, after all, a story about Wesley proving that he is capable of doing the right thing, the brave thing, even if the Captain isn't there to back him up. And his behavior throughout generally gets that character-appropriate balance of nerdy arrogance and desperate insecurity; he's dismissive and snide to Dirgo, the shuttlecraft "captain" whose crappy ship maroons them on a planet moon and whose arrogance keeps putting everyone in danger, but that dismissiveness isn't strong enough to dissuade Dirgo from an obviously foolhardy course of action. (Points to the episode, by the way, for killing Dirgo. If he'd stayed around, Wesley would've had to get the upper hand with him eventually, and that just wouldn't have worked.) But once he's left alone with Picard, the neediness returns, and it's cloying and misjudged. Wesley's desperation is heartbreaking, for all the wrong reasons.

This has always been my biggest problem with Wesley, really. His fan-worship of Picard is probably his biggest Mary Sue aspect; he's the stand in for any nerd who dreamed of standing alongside Captain Kirk and Spock and the rest in *TOS*, and it never quite rang true for me as something that was specifically his, and not just the show's assumption that, hey, any young male cast member would be devoted to winning Picard's approval. This isn't helped much by Wil Wheaton's performance. He's grown into the role over time, and I don't really think anyone could've made it work (much like Tasha Yar, this is someone whose underpinnings are so fundamentally flawed that you'd need a really terrific performer to make sense out of them), but he plays this confession without holding onto any piece of his own dignity. It's more the guileless intensity of a much younger man, and that makes the speech that much harder to take seriously. There's something wrong here, the brain tells us, because the words we're hearing and the face they're coming from don't really match.

Contrast that with Wesley's confrontation with the energy force that guards the only source of water around. It works very well. Wheaton does a great job looking scared and determined, and it's one of the few times I can remember the show allowing him to look, well, pretty bad-ass. It's also a nice touch that we never figure out exactly what's going on here. There's the fountain of water, which is protected by a shield, and whenever anyone tries to damage the shield, a rush of ... something comes out and cocoons them. Picard and Wesley's circumstances are dire enough that there isn't much time for speculation as to *why* this is; it's just a matter of how to stop it long enough to get

something to drink. It's a weirdly specific creation, and because of that, it has a certain solidity to it. That's a basic rule of thumb for creating alien devices, I'd say: Make it clear what it does, and justification is largely unnecessary.

Another element that works here: unlike in some other episodes, the subplot back on the *Enterprise* never becomes extraneous. The crisis Riker and the crew face with the garbage ship is just the right kind of problem to stall them from rescuing the others. It's not so huge as to be impossible to resolve in time, but it's not so easy to get past that it stretches credibility how long it takes them to finish. Again, we get a reminder of the professionalism of the crew, as no one ever suggests they turn away from their duty to try and find Picard and Wesley, not even Beverly, who has probably a little more invested in Wesley than the others. And again, we're reminded of just how useless Troi is. Her main contribution to the episode is to badger Beverly over her worries about Wesley. I'm not sure what point she was trying to prove. Yes, Beverly is worried, but she has a job to do, and that's what she's going to focus on. Maybe if Troi had started talking about how Jack Crusher was dead, and how Wesley was the only family she had left, and how she'd always been close to Picard, Bev might've broken down completely.

Despite my objections above, I can't really find it in my heart to dislike this episode. It does what it needs to do, sending Wesley off in a befitting manner without really belaboring the point, and it managed to generate tension out of a situation we've seen half a dozen times on the show before. Mostly, though, I'm just grateful we won't have to deal with Wesley pleading for attention anymore. Godspeed, O Dork. And while you're gone, see if you can find some damn backbone.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Dirgo is hilariously useless. He serves his purpose, but it would've been nice if he'd had some character beyond, "The Worst Travelling Companion Ever."
- Some really obvious model work during the garbage scow scenes.
- Next week, we take a look at "The Loss" and celebrate "Data's Day."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Loss"/"Data's Day"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[12/16/10 10:00AM](#)

"The Loss"

Or The One Where Troi Loses Her Shit

You know what? I don't think a therapist who could physically sense your emotional state would be all that useful. Therapy is a relationship based on trust, and one of the ways that trust is established (the primary way, I'd argue) is through an exchange of information. That exchange is somewhat one-sided; the counselor may share certain experiences from their own life if they feel its relevant to the discussion, but the sessions are focused on you and the problems you're dealing with. But it's still a dialogue in which the two of you working together establish boundaries, and then work to move those boundaries as necessary. Troi essentially shortcuts this process. Her Betazoid empathy allows her to get past all manner of subterfuge and stalling, and while that seems like it would be useful for *her*, I'm not sure it's that helpful to her patients. Instead of breaking down their own barriers, she just takes a peek and tells them what she sees. You can't write a very good paper on *Ulysses* if all you ever read is the last five pages. ("There aren't any periods or paragraphs, but the narrator seems pleasant enough. Maybe she's drunk?")

This isn't to say that a good therapist couldn't use Troi's abilities to focus their efforts and help them figure out potential suicide risks, but, well, Troi isn't what I'd call a good therapist. She's nosy, forceful, and generally useless, and while it's certainly possible that someone that grew up with her gifts wouldn't develop the more difficult ways of understanding others, there's no sense that the writers have really been willing to acknowledge that up until now. She's an amazing ship's counselor, we're told, because she's on the *Enterprise*, and because everyone else around her keeps saying she's amazing. And yet, so far as I can tell, she's about average when it comes to dealing with people, no more tactful or insightful than anyone else. Sometimes even less so. I keep thinking about her session with

Barclay, when she invaded the personal space of a man who was deeply infatuated with her, without any notion as to how this might make him less comfortable or able to speak.

Ostensibly, "The Loss" is an attempt to deal with this problem head on, by forcing Troi to endure what must be one of her worst fears: losing her empathy. It's not a bad premise (some of my favorite episodes of classic *Trek* revolved around screwing with Spock's logical detachment; it's not quite the same thing, but both concepts are built from a classic dramatic concept, pushing a character outside of their comfort zone), and Troi desperately needs something to do at this point. By now, nearly every major character has had a chance to deepen and establish themselves as more than just a bland caricature, but the women on *TNG* remain under-done, more there because, well, it couldn't be a ship of all guys, right? Beverly is basically just a blur of non-threatening femininity, but at least she got her chance to shine in "Remember Me." Mostly, Troi just hangs around to point out the obvious and, if there's stuff with feelings involved, get up in everybody's business. She needs *something* to make her more than just a G-rated sex symbol.

It doesn't really work, though. While travelling on its merry way through the vast reaches of the unknown, the *Enterprise* comes across a cluster of, well, space thingies, and for some reason, their encounter with the cluster coincides with Troi suffering a bad headache, an onset of dizziness, and most importantly, a blackout of her psychic knack. So far, so good, even if it does seem like half the time the counselor spends on the *Enterprise*, she spends getting assaulted by some anonymous inter-stellar force. (Sorry, I'm experiencing sudden "The Child" flashbacks.) Troi is obviously upset about what happened to her. She repeatedly compares the experience to blindness, which is a decent way to help us in the audience relate to what's happening to her. She starts yelling at people. And that's where it gets tricky.

I love the concept here, although it presents certain difficulties even before you get to the Pale Purple Peril herself. *TNG* episodes tend to be self-contained. There are exceptions, yes: two-parters, and intermittent continuity references, which provide a fascinating example of how television was learning to develop long-form narratives while still maintaining episodic arcs. But these things are notable because they exist somewhat in isolation. In general, when the crew of the *Enterprise* encounters a problem, that problem will be resolved before next week's installment; and more importantly for this discussion, any emotional ramifications that problem might cause will be cleared away as well. Hey, remember how the love of Worf's life was brutally murdered in "Reunion"? And he has a son now? He gets a few lines in "The Loss" and "Data's Day," and this never comes up.

That isn't really a problem. It's not like we need to have everyone constantly referring to past traumas, and hell, Worf has always been a private guy. (Besides, the less we hear about Alexander, the happier we'll be.) But there's a curious sense of emotional reset here that shows the uneasy compromise between the essentially continuity-free *TOS*, and the serialized storytelling we've come to expect these days in our dramas. Picard's sojourn with the Borg created sufficient mental anguish in him to require a whole extra episode to process the experience, but this is rare. All of which is a roundabout way of explaining why Troi's suffering in "The Loss" is essentially inconsequential even before it really begins. We know it's not permanent, because this isn't the kind of show that *does* permanent; and we know it'll all be over before it really has much impact.

Again, this could work fine. Not all nods to continuity need to be overt; some events have on-going impact without ever being explicitly acknowledged, simply because *we* know they happened, and that colors our perception of characters from that moment on. (Which is one of the reasons why, once a character portrayal goes south, it's nearly impossible to recover.) But "The Loss" requires us to feel both appalled at Troi's behavior and sympathetic at the anguish she's experiencing, and it's so much better at the former that the latter is nearly impossible. Her jump from "Oh my god!" to "Screw you for your kindness" is nearly instantaneous, and there's not a strong enough base for her character for you to have a rooting interest in her regaining her self-esteem. We know she'll have her powers back by

the end, but it should be a Magic Feather moment. There should be a sense that the power was in Troi all along, psychic peeping or no. Instead, the lie has been exposed; without her feather, she can't fly.

Basically, instead of solving the Troi Problem, "The Loss" makes it more acute. In arguably the episode's most effective scene, Riker tells his former lover that she probably deserved to get taken down a peg, that he's glad they're finally on more equal footing. It's a speech that will most likely inspire nods in the audience, but the underlying subtext is uncomfortable. If this was a show with stronger female characters, where women weren't routinely relegated to maternal roles, made into shrill harridans, or killed off to inspire their lovers to action, Riker and Troi's confrontation would be about what it should be about: them and no one else. As is, it's mostly about that, but you can't help thinking it's also about a woman being put in her place.

Whether or not you agree with that interpretation, this still isn't a very strong episode. The cluster of space thingies, their two-dimensional nature, the ship getting pulled towards a cosmic string ... that's not bad sci-fi stuff. But the episode lives and dies on Troi's shaky shoulders, and there's not enough of her there to carry the weight. In the end, she gratefully tells her friends, "I've never really appreciated how difficult and rewarding it is to be human." This is a lie, one that the show is trying to sell as hard as Troi is, and neither is up to the task.

Grade: C+

Stray Observations:

- I've been watching too much *Trek*. I saw a new ensign on the bridge with a large forehead, and I immediately assumed she was an alien.
- All right, Guinan needs to go away now.

"Data's Day"

Or The One Where O'Brien Gets Married

I guess this week's theme is "episodes that could've been great and really aren't." Because on paper, the idea of a Data-centric episode, one that follows him around his daily activities on the *Enterprise*, sounds terrific. *TNG* has a fairly consistent structural format. This format is loose enough that it rarely feels tired (certain plot developments get old, but not how the stories themselves are built), but it's there. The ship is going somewhere, a crisis occurs; generally, this crisis requires more from certain crewmembers than from others, but sometimes, the whole ensemble gets pulled in. We spend the hour trying to figure out the problem, various solutions are proposed, and then, finally, one of them works. Important life lessons may or may not be learned.

There's nothing particularly special about this. It's the way a lot of TV works, and unless you're doing a character drama or investing in more heavily serialized storytelling, this is basically the best engine for running a show. (Think of it as the Unreal of television.) That doesn't mean that we can't think outside the box from time to time. Off-format episodes have tremendous potential, because they force us to watch a series, and its familiar, soothing rhythms, in a new way. It helps strengthen the reality of the world, by shining a light into corners not generally explored, and it allows writers to comment on our expectations without breaking the fourth wall. Plus, there's a playfulness to a lot of these, even when the subject is dour. It's meta without the deconstruction. And it's fun. Who doesn't like fun?

I guess I don't like fun, because "Data's Day" is, while still telling a traditional *TNG* plot, off-format, and I didn't care for it. We see here some of *TNG*'s worst crimes: its pastel emotional palette, the way it reduces men and women to childish caricatures, and its willingness to rely on stereotypes to get its point across. Data, who's gone from being a simplistic Pinocchio figure to something far more complex and unique, is once again forced back into the role of

perpetually bewildered observer. We don't learn anything new about him we didn't know before this; we don't really learn anything about anyone. Oh, O'Brien is marrying a woman named Keiko. Also, a Vulcan ambassador turns out to be a Romulan spy in disguise. Also, also, Beverly can tap dance.

There's nothing as actively off-putting in "Day" as there was in "The Loss"; the episode isn't trying to invest new dimensions into a under-developed character or trying to justify Data in some way. Along with Picard, Data is one of the only characters on the show who's been strong nearly from the start, and he's just gotten stronger over time. "Day" even references one of Data's key episodes, "The Measure Of A Man." The android is writing down his experiences over the course of a singular 24 hour period to help Bruce Maddox (the guy who initially wanted to dismantle Data so they could figure out how to build more of him) better understand how his brain works. If you guessed this means endless repetitions of "Data is baffled by the illogic of basic human behavior," go buy yourself a Coke.

This all starts off well enough. We rarely get a sense of how scheduling works on the *Enterprise*; since everything is artificial, the "night" period has to be simulated by dimming lights. It's a small detail, but it fits, and it also fits that Data would be tasked with running the bridge crew during the early morning hours, given that he doesn't need to sleep. Then Data explains, via narration, that he's playing father-of-the-bride for O'Brien and Keiko's wedding, and he pays a visit to Keiko to see how she's holding up before her big day. She's not well at all, and demands that Data tell O'Brien that the wedding is off.

Sigh. Let's unpack this, shall we? We've never seen Keiko before, but that's all right. O'Brien is someone we know, but we don't spend a lot of time with him off-duty, and it's not that weird that he might've found a girlfriend and gotten engaged while no one was looking. Thing is, since this is the first time we're meeting Keiko, our impression is going to be based on her immediate actions, and, well, she doesn't make a whole lot of sense. She's decided she wants to call off the wedding, but she doesn't give any specific reason for doing so; she seems upset, but not distraught. The fact that she asks Data to tell her husband-to-be that she's having cold feet just serves to make her seem selfish, flighty, and barely substantial. This is all supposed to fall under heading of "Women, they so crazy!", and it doesn't work. Later in the episode, she suddenly decides that she'll go through with the marriage after all, and there's no sense to any of it. Data's confusion about emotional responses only works if the emotional responses are ones that make sense to *us*; part of the enjoyment of seeing him puzzle through things is realizing how absurd most of what we feel really is, and there's no fun in randomness being identified as randomness. Of course Data couldn't follow what happens. No one could.

The other main plot of the episode fares better. The *Enterprise* is doing an escort mission for a Vulcan ambassador, but she requests a change in course that takes them toward the Neutral Zone. She claims to be initiating negotiations with the Romulans, but it's all a ruse; once the *Enterprise* meets the Romulan ship, the ambassador beams over, faking her death in the process. This is b-grade political stuff (it could've been stronger if we know more about the ambassador), but it works well enough because it holds together, and because we're only privy to what Data knows, so we have to piece together the details as we go. Data's investigation into the ambassador's death gives him a chance to trot out the expected Sherlock Holmes reference, and the reveal that the ambassador was not who she appeared to be fits the facts. It's a bit of a stretch that all of this could happen in the course of one day, though.

Apart from Keiko's baffling behavior, "Day" is disappointing less for what it is, than for what it could have been. There's no effort here, no clever insights, nothing but supposedly crowd-pleasing pablum. The sappiness grates, and the comedy bits, like Data's dancing lesson with Beverly, fall consistently flat. We get an overdose of Data explaining irony, and we get Data not being able to smile properly. Frankly, I have a hard time believing either of these. The android's character arc is a slow progression toward developing a soul, and if we don't get the sense that's he's learned anything from the countless jokes he's heard before, than he becomes static. We don't need regular

check-ins with Data to prove he's doing his homework, but those episodes that do focus on him need to show him capable of change. Nothing that happens in "Data's Day" couldn't have happened two seasons ago. That's a shame. That it's boring, too, makes the shame damn near a crime.

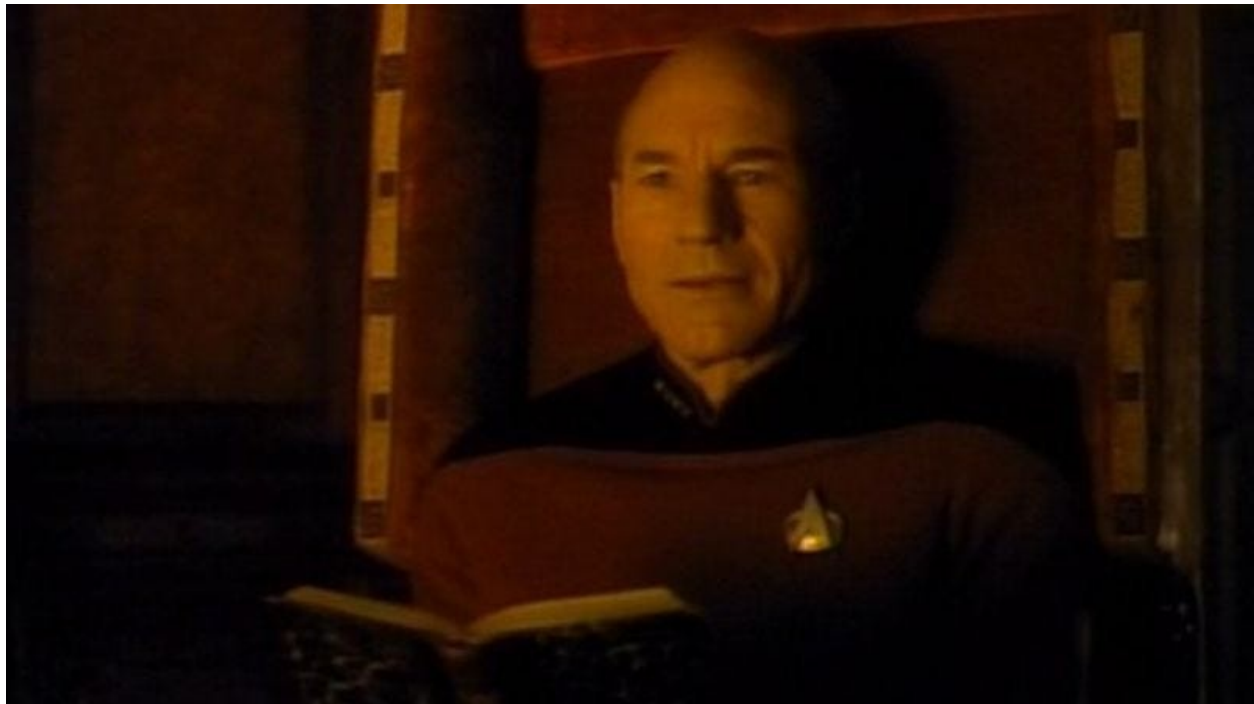
Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- Hey, check out Riker making time with the cute redhead on the bridge. A hero to us all, truly.
- I'm too lazy to check, but I think Picard's speech at the wedding is the same as Kirk's wedding speech in *TOS*.
- "I could be chasing an untamed ornithoid without cause."

Next week: We check in on "The Wounded" and find out just how much the "Devil's Due."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Wounded"/"Devil's Due"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[12/23/10 12:45PM](#)

"The Wounded"

Or The One Where We Meet The Cardassians, And The Warden Of Shawshank Prison Makes Some Bad Calls

As though to prove me wrong after all my talk about closed episode continuity, the first entry in this week's *Star Trek* double feature picks up essentially where "Data's Day" leaves off. Oh, we don't deal with the ramifications of a Romulan spy infiltrating the Vulcan government (although I agree with the commenter who pointed out last week that you'd think this would be a pretty big deal). Nor does Data do much in the way of soft-shoe. But we do check in on O'Brien and Keiko, and their interactions suggest a couple still in the early stages of matrimonial bliss. Actually, they seem more like two people fumbling through a third date, one that isn't too likely to lead to a fourth. Keiko is less crazy this week, but there isn't a lot of chemistry between her and her apparent husband. (So maybe this episode takes place three or four years *after* "Data's Day"?) Maybe this is some kind of mail-order bride scenario or an arranged wedding.

Whatever the reason, O'Brien has more chemistry with his former captain, Ben Maxwell, than we ever see him having with his wife, but that works to "The Wounded's" advantage. This isn't an episode about marriage, or love, at least not of the romantic kind. This is more about trying to find honor in situations that require more subtle responses and how trauma can warp the judgment of even the best of men. It's an episode I enjoyed, although this is a story that's been done and been done to death many times before. I'm fairly certain we've seen some variation of this on *TNG* already and in *TOS* and half a dozen other genre shows besides. Hell, this is basically Space Rambo, only Bob Gunton isn't 'roided up, and there's no Space Brian Dennehy getting in his face and thinking he's a hippie.

Stripped to its basics, this isn't a plot I automatically have a lot of interest in. It's one of those concepts (the warrior who can't find peace) that makes so much inherent sense that it becomes almost too familiar. Like, say, a Christmas episode when everyone has to be reminded that the holidays should be about everything *but* freaking out over buying the right toys. Once a theme or moral becomes a common part of our cultural experience, it becomes a sort of unwritten requirement or fall-back position for TV show writers. It's fertile material, but it also allows for lazy writing, because the structure is so readily identifiable. That means that nearly all of these stories follow the same arc, and it means that once you've seen a few of them, it can seem like you've seen them all. Not every show can support a storyline about a soldier unable to come in from the cold, but enough of them can, so that it's easy to recognize the signs.

When we learn that Maxwell, as Captain of the *Phoenix*, destroyed a seemingly unprotected Cardassian science station, did anyone really think it was an innocent mistake, or that his behavior had been justified? I know I didn't. That's partly because a morally questionable Maxwell makes for a more interesting story (if the Cardassians were just flat out lying bastards ... well, okay, we'll get to that), but also because the minute we learn about the massacre Maxwell and O'Brien witnessed, and how Maxwell lost his family, it doesn't take much effort to follow the lines. The only way to make this work is by finding a new angle to play it from. It doesn't have to be shockingly original, but it has to surprise us out of our expectations just long enough to get our attention.

"Wounded" mostly worked for me, and, as always, the details are the crucial difference between a decent episode, and a very good one. It's great to see O'Brien get so much attention; this is (if I'm remembering correctly) the first episode where he's been actually crucial to the resolution of the main storyline and not just in a "Well, somebody has to push the button that activates the transporters" kind of way. Colm Meaney is more than up to the task. His scenes with Keiko are enjoyable (although weirdly tense, as I kept expecting casual conversation to break into a soul-shredding, George-and-Martha-style argument at any moment), and his final scene with Gunton, as O'Brien tries to talk his former captain out of killing again, is understated and all the more moving for that.

Understatement is really the key word for Meaney's entire performance, and it's most crucial in his transition from pretending he's fine seeing Cardassians on board the *Enterprise*, to admitting he's not all that happy to have to deal with their race again. There's subtext in his scenes here, always a welcome presence, and while we've seen characters denying their issues before (just last week, in fact), rarely have they seemed so utterly divided in their circumstance. O'Brien repeatedly tells everyone he has no problem with the Cardassians, and he never sounds all that defensive when he says it. And yet the instant he's left alone with the aliens, he's stand-offish to the point of rudeness, and it's not the kind of calculated rudeness you see from a man who quite realizes the depth of his disquiet. It's a small point, but an important one; instead of milking his internal conflict for more obvious drama, Meaney stays on the level throughout.

In addition to helping make that final scene (which ends with Maxwell and O'Brien singing a song together, which could've been mawkish, but is instead one of the most striking moments I've seen on the show, as it's just so simple and direct) work, unexpected subtlety benefits the rest of the episode as well, primarily in our introduction to the Cardassians. This is the first we've seen or heard of the race, and while it helps to know how important they'll become to the franchise in the future, specifically on *Deep Space Nine*, the few we meet here are interesting enough in their own right, with or without context. We've met warlike races before, and initially, that's what the Cardassians seem to be. There's a treaty between them and the Federation, but it's only a year old, so things are still tense, and when the *Enterprise* moves into Cardassian space, a ship fires on them without provocation or warning. Not a good sign. When the *Enterprise* takes out the attacking ship's weapons and finally makes contact, we get our first glimpse of the Cardassians, and they don't look friendly. It's one of the coolest alien designs we've had on the show, really. They just look like monsters.

Which makes it all the more interesting when they don't actually *act* like monsters. Like I said, warlike races are a dime a dozen on the show, and it's been so long since I watched *DS9* that I fully expected Gul Macet, the Cardassian captain of the ship that attacks the *Enterprise* in the first scene, to start yelling and posturing and making a fuss. He's icily polite, however, and he maintains that detachment throughout the entire episode. Of the three Cardassians that beam over to the *Enterprise* to help Picard, et al., on their hunt for the *Phoenix*, only one ever really displays an emotion, and he's quickly reprimanded and dismissed by his commanding officer. Clearly, this is a race that prides itself on maintaining equanimity whatever the cost, and the tension this creates between the intensity of the situation and Macet's measured response helps keep the audience off-balance.

Another point in "Wounded's" favor is how far Maxwell goes before the *Enterprise* is able to catch up with him. We hear that he destroyed the science station, but we get to "see" (in a science fiction kind of way) him take out a Cardassian battle cruiser and a supposedly un-armed cargo ship as well. It's not a huge point, but destruction does raise the stakes, and it's effective because it's a strong choice from a dramatic perspective. We don't see the Cardassians dying, and we certainly don't know anything about them before they explode, but their deaths can't simply be waved away as a mistake or tactical error. I also like that Picard eventually caves and provides Macet with the *Phoenix*'s transponder codes, thus, theoretically at least, opening Maxwell's ship up to attack. He's forced into a situation where he has no other choice, and that he accepts this, rather than blustering, fits in with his character. That the codes prove ultimately worthless is just a bonus, plot-wise.

I'm not sure what to make of Picard's deduction that Maxwell really was on to something and that the Cardassians aren't being entirely forthcoming about their plans in the end. It does allow Picard to make some strong, difficult choices; he argues that Maxwell was still in the wrong, since his actions would've eventually led back to war. The only way to hold to the peace treaty is to keep an appearance of surface friendliness and hope everybody calms the hell down. Which is all very Cold War of Picard and so forth, but while I appreciate the attempt to add another wrinkle of moral complexity to the story, I'm not sure how well it works that the Cardassians really do turn out to be kind of evil. Although making them perfectly good would've been an over-simplification the other way. Hm.

Maybe it's better to focus on O'Brien's conversation with a Cardassian officer in Ten-Forward. It hits just the right tone; O'Brien is attempting to make up for his rudeness earlier, and the Cardassian, while uncomfortable aboard the *Enterprise*, is likable and clearly trying to make a good impression. Things get awkward when O'Brien explains his bad feelings towards Cardassians, describing the massacre that killed Maxwell's family and led to O'Brien killing a Cardassian in battle, but what I love about the scene is that it doesn't get *too* awkward. O'Brien doesn't end his speech screaming or in a rage, and there's no fighting between him and the other officer. It plays less like something that's supposed to teach us a lesson about how war messes with people's minds and more like just an honest conversation between two individuals trying to find some mutual understanding in an impossible situation. This isn't the dramatic highpoint of the episode, but it works very well. It's moments like that which make "The Wounded"'s familiar ideas still seem fresh.

Grade: A-

Stray Observations:

- "Maybe I'll have something special for you tonight, too." OMG, guys! I think Keiko is talking about S-E-X! Tee-hee, snicker, blush, etc.
- "I hate what I became because of you."
- Another nice touch: The song Maxwell and O'Brien sing is the same song O'Brien was singing earlier at dinner with his wife. A dead comrade used to sing it.

"Devil's Due"

Or *The One Where Picard Plays Daniel Webster*

Well, that was *fun*. And a nice change of pace after the somberness of "Wounded," to boot.

Did you know there was supposed to be a second *Star Trek* series with most of the original cast? Of course you did, because you know pretty much everything. But in case your memory is hazy, *Star Trek: Phase II* was planned in the late '70s, after numerous attempts to bring the *Trek* crew to the big screen had failed. The show folded before completing any episodes, but it gave us Will Decker and the bald babe Illia, who both popped up in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. It also gave us a handful of story ideas that would eventually get recycled into episodes of *TNG*. This includes "The Child," which means I have someone else to blame for that one, as well as today's far more palatable entry, "Devil's Due." (This brief history lesson provided courtesy of Wikipedia.)

Even if we didn't know this, it would be easy to mistake "Due" for an episode of the original series. It has the same broad tone, the pushy sexuality that's more than a little campy, the parable-style morality. Once we understand the central conflict, there's no real effort made to deepen that conflict or subvert our expectations for where the story will go. A thousand years ago, the people of Ventax II made a deal with Ardra, their version of the Devil, for a millennium of peace and prosperity. At the end of that millennium, Ardra would come back to take ownership of the planet and everyone on it. Funnily enough, that millennium is just about over when the *Enterprise* arrives to help a beleaguered science station (man, science stations are like the red-headed step-children of *TNG*). And a few minutes after Picard and a few others beam down to try and talk some sense into a paranoid government, a woman arrives claiming to be Ardra, demanding what's rightfully hers.

It's not hard to see where this is going. "Ardra" is a con-woman, and it's up to our heroes to prove she's a con-woman in a way that nullifies the contract with Ventax II. Science versus superstition, and all that rot. On the one hand, well, it's somewhat difficult to justify the *Enterprise* giving over so much time to such a silly conflict. The episode does its best to pretend that Ardra is a real threat, but given the sort of the threats we usually encounter on the show, I'm not really buying it. She mostly an irritant, and her ridiculous claim that she owns the *Enterprise* along with the rest of the planet only makes sense if you don't think about it too hard. Really, Picard is just picking a fight because he's annoyed, and while I'm not sure that would work as a long-term policy for Starfleet, Patrick Stewart is entertaining enough while irritated that that doesn't, ultimately, matter. (Maybe he's just happy to finally get a Q-like being whose ass he can kick.)

Past this, we already know Ardra is a fake, which means that in order for the episode to have any real tension at all, it has to spend most of its running time trying to make us doubt our assumptions. So we get increasingly impressive displays of Ardra's power. She can transport herself pretty much anywhere she likes, seemingly change forms, and cause earthquakes. Oh, and she can seemingly make the *Enterprise* disappear, which isn't too shabby. None of this is ever really convincing. It might've worked in *TOS*, where the rules were looser and the frontier more wild, but on *TNG*, reality is too well established. There's civilization. There are systems intact, and these systems don't allow for the existence of anything as tacky as the Devil. (Although it does allow for Picard's horrible beachwear, so maybe the laws of wardrobe are exempt.) Picard never doubts that Ardra is a sham, so why should we?

So, without any real drama, "Due" has to fall back on charm. How well that works depends on how much of a kick you get from seeing Picard playing Captain Kirk for most of the running time. Actually, Picard behaves much as he always does: smart, capable, and not much one for shenanigans. But Ardra is instantly smitten with his cue-ball good looks and general air of contempt and goes to great lengths to seduce him. She even makes him the prize in the bet that drives the episode's climax. Now, arguably, part of her efforts here are to try and get him to back off his investigations; if Picard was a little less scrupulous (and Ardra a shade hotter), he might have compromised himself and thus let Ardra go about her con without interfering. But Picard is so clearly disinterested that any strategic

advantage to be gained from seducing him is basically moot. There's no way Ardra could have gotten away with her game for long, but she might have been able to maintain it long enough to rob the Ventaxians blind if she'd timed her efforts better. Maybe she could have waited until after the *Enterprise* left. At the very least, claiming the ship belongs to her means she's a "flimflam artist" with a perilously overstated notion of her own abilities. It's especially telling that, when she zaps herself into Picard's bedroom and starts trying on different bodies to please him, she turns into Troi (the *Enterprise* female crew member she's most familiar with), rather than the more appropriate-to-Picard Beverly.

Ardra isn't much of a threat, nobody's really in danger, and it's not hard to see how all of this plays out. But it's silly, goofy fun for the most part. Not remarkable and maybe a little disappointing in its unwillingness to bring *TNG*'s now-expected complexity to the situation. (Wouldn't it have been cool to get more of a sense of how the Ventaxians were dealing with this? Maybe have a religious leader helping to fund Ardra's efforts as a way of grabbing power?) But it's nothing to be embarrassed about. And yes, I'm including Picard's ridiculously short .. what the hell is that, anyway, a bed dress or something? "Due" resolves in the expected manner; Picard and his crew managed to trace Ardra's powers back to their source, and they used that source to prove she was a fake by duplicating her effects. (I did like Picard's arguments that Ardra didn't really do anything to give Ventax II peace.) It's satisfying, in a "bazooka taking down a housefly" kind of way. The whole thing is a lark.

By happy coincidence, "Due" begins with Data and Picard engaging in theater games on the holodeck; this time, instead of Shakespeare, Data is playing Scrooge in a "production" of *A Christmas Carol*. So what do you know? An actual Christmas moment on a show that generally avoids references to specific holidays or seasonal charms. (Generally to their credit.) "Due" isn't a Christmas episode, and arguably, the episode's main theme, the rejection of superstition in favor of logic and reasoning, is in direct conflict with pretty much every Yuletide-themed TV episode ever made. It almost makes me wish we *did* get a *TNG* Christmas show, although I'm sure it would have been awful. Anyway, it was a cute bit, and offers me the chance to say: Happy holidays, everyone. If you get presents, I hope you get what you want. And if you don't exchange gifts in your family, I hope you have neighbors who do, and that they don't always lock their doors. See you next week.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Picard tells Data that "flimflam artists" (I really can't get enough of that term) use fear. It's an interesting point; most stories about confidence artists focus on how they build trust with their marks, but I suppose fear also creates a bond. The drawback is that if your mark is afraid of you, they have every reason to want to end your relationship. If the mark *trusts* you, though, you get to decide when to move on.
- "On the contrary. I find you obvious and vulgar." Picard burn!
- Next week, we send off the old year with "Clues" and "First Contact."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Clues"/"First Contact"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[12/30/10 1:25PM](#)

"Clues"

Or The One Where We'd Tell You What Happened, But Then We'd Have To Kill You

I love mysteries. More to the point, I love mysteries that have definitive solutions, which is the sort of thing you only ever really find in fiction. Mysteries in the real world rarely, if ever, have clear answers, because in the real world, we don't ever know the whole picture. Murder is often inscrutably mundane, the end result of a series of choices and social pressures that only the gods themselves could reconstruct with any degree of certainty. And smaller puzzles are just as tricky. I'm exaggerating a little. The Mystery Of Who Drank The Last Beer isn't, y'know, one for the ages or anything. But mysteries in fiction, even of the most experimental, realistic sort, are always neater than their reality-based counterparts. In fiction, it's a puzzle with a solution that at least one person knows. In life, it's often as not just a culmination of coincidence.

Thankfully, the *Enterprise* exists in the land of make believe, so when this series calls an episode "Clues," you can be reasonably sure there's a riddle coming, and that it will have an answer, whether we like it or not. I liked it, even if I didn't remember what was going on roughly halfway into the story. If a mystery can hold your interest even on a second viewing, after you know all the tricks, then it has to be doing something right. "Clues" isn't quite as thematically deep as the show's best episodes tend to be, but it's very clever, the premise is intriguing, and it's one of those stories where I find myself obsessing over the implications at the margins. And I get a pleasant rush of nostalgia off it, too, as this was always my favorite kind of plot when I was younger. Yes, yes, characters were all well and good, but when I watched a sci-fi show, I wanted weird sci-fi junk happening, dammit.

As weird sci-fi junk goes, this is a good start: While gadding about the cosmos on their usual "let's poke things and see what happens" mission, the *Enterprise* finds a new Class M planet worthy of investigating. They set a course, but before they can get close enough to the planet to probe it, they come across a wormhole that knocks everybody on board the ship unconscious. Everybody except for Data, that is. We cut to the title sequence, and when we get back to the episode proper, Picard and the others are waking up. Data assures them they were only unconscious for 30 seconds, and here they are, light years away from that crazy planet they were going to investigate. So maybe it would be for the best to just to forget the whole thing ever happened. Space is really big. Nutty stuff like this is happening all the time.

Except Data's explanation isn't quite as airtight as one might expect from an android. And there are all these, well, clues that something strange happened and that those missing 30 seconds are actually a lot longer than half a minute. Beverly's attempts to grow cotton candy in the lab (oh sure, it's supposedly some kind of moss, but I know cotton candy when I see it, and I hope we'll see Bev running off to join the space carnies soon) have yielded far more results than the short time gap would allow. On a hunch, the good doctor makes use of transporter records to prove that the crew's internal clocks are off by at least a day. And with each new discovery, Data's attempts to explain away the situation become more forced. He is, as always, unfailingly polite, but there's a certain evasive quality to his tact that's impossible to ignore. Which is unsettling, because if someone tampered with Data in those missing moments ... well, who knows what else might've happened?

Also, Troi keeps losing her shit. Which seems to be a regular occurrence for her, but in her defense, whenever Troi starts freaking out, there's always something going on. At least she isn't pregnant again. Man, I know I rag on the character a lot, but "Clues" just makes me feel really bad for her. Her abilities give her an edge in dealing with new species. (Although it's odd that emotions are somehow a universal language, isn't it? What, exactly, is she sensing? We just assume feelings are the same all over, because that's essentially the case here on Earth. For humans, anger is anger, even if it's *colère* or *гнев* or what have you. But that doesn't make it the same all over.) But those abilities also make her incredibly vulnerable to any force that needs a handy conduit for interacting with the ship. Maybe it's no wonder she seems so raw and nervous so much of the time. It's a wonder she isn't completely insane; every day offers a thousand new ways to get brain-raped.

What makes this episode work, for me, is the way the solution to the big mystery plays off our assumptions. We've been trained by years of watching this kind of show to automatically believe that something bad happened in that missing time period, and Data is trying to cover it up; if everything really was on the level, well, there wouldn't be much of an episode here. (I suppose you could do a story about a character obsessing over a discrepancy that proved to be entirely irrelevant, but that would be very tricky to pull off. Audiences don't tend to like it when someone reminds them that Santa Claus isn't real. By which I mean we like the magic to be magical and not just a trick.) Which makes it all the more satisfying when we turn out to be right and wrong at the same time. Yes, the *Enterprise* lost more than 30 seconds, and yes, Data has been restrained from telling the true story of what happened. But the ruse was created by Picard and the rest of the crew, and Data's restrictions were put in place by Picard himself. It's just a Picard that the current Picard can't remember anymore.

The wormhole wasn't actually a wormhole. It was a protective measure put in place by the xenophobic aliens that live on the Class M planet the *Enterprise* was intent on investigating. Normally, the faux hole would've knocked out everybody on the ship, and sent them on their merry way; they would've woken up, assumed the obvious, and never bothered going back. Unfortunately, Data monkeywrenched this. Because he remained conscious, he was able to revive the crew, which led to them pushing forward with their investigations. So the xenophobic aliens body-jumped Troi to say, "We're sorry, but we have to kill all of you to protect our secret." Past-Picard decided that the best course of action was to wipe everybody's memory and behave as though the trap had actually worked as intended. He

ordered Data not to reveal the truth, which explains Data's increasingly unconvincing attempts at obfuscation. It's just that they weren't quite as careful in covering their tracks as they might have been.

I tend to mistrust absolute scenarios in fiction, situations that present heroes with a choice that allows for no gray area, and "Clues" relies on one to work. We have to assume that the alien race is so immensely powerful that the *Enterprise* can't withstand their attack, and that Picard's first choice, on being presented with such a threat, is to immediately bow to its wishes. This latter makes a certain amount of sense; it's not exactly a Prime Directive question, but the captain has demonstrated on more than one occasion his willingness to respect a species' wishes, so long as those wishes don't harm his crew. But this all seems a little too neat. As I've argued before, *TNG* is at its best when it's a show about consequences, and in a way, this episode is all about avoiding consequences. It's a closed loop. In the end, once they solve the mystery of the missing time, the crew goes re-creating that mystery, only this time, doing it so well that their future selves will never notice the discrepancy. The alien race is basically moot to the series as a whole. There's no character development here that will last (except for Data; who knows how many contradictions are stored in his synapses by now?), and the very nature of the solution dictates that we'll never hear about this again.

Still, I quite like this episode, because it's unsettling in a way that isn't really apparent unless you think about it. There's something creepy in knowing that Picard and the rest willingly brainwiped themselves, not once, but twice. It makes you question just how many gaps they've come across in their travels and if any of those gaps are as meaningful as this one. Will Troi still be troubled by bad dreams? Or even better, maybe there's another crewmember on-board, someone we never meet, but due to their genetic make-up, the memory wipes don't work quite as efficiently as they ought to. Maybe they're being driven slowly insane by the constant, nagging suspicion that reality isn't as consistent as it ought to be. And sometimes they'll pass Data in the corridors, and they'll try and ask him a question, but they don't quite dare to speak. Just because we don't see the consequences ourselves doesn't mean we can't imagine them.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Also, I really, really like clever. Have I mentioned that?
- Not much to say about that cold open. I'm just grateful we didn't spend the whole episode mucking about with Dixon Hill.

"First Contact"

Or The One Which Doesn't Have The Borg, But Does Have The Bebe

If "Clues" is an episode which does well by a shallow concept, "First Contact" is one that takes a very important concept, one that is, in its way, key to the series as a whole, in its notions of respect and exploration and idealism, and doesn't entirely make it work. Although even that's not quite right. "Contact" holds together just fine overall, but I ended up respecting it more than I enjoyed it. More than anything, it feels like a homework episode, akin to the bloodless, Oscar-bait movies that plague cinemas in the late fall. It's not a failure, by any stretch, and I can understand why an episode like this belongs in the series, but too much of it plays out like an algebra problem. Here are our variables; here is our equation. Plug them together, and take careful note of what follows.

This sounds overly harsh, which means I get to spend the next paragraph trying to backpedal. I really do admire the idea here. We're seeing what must be a fairly typical "first contact" moment between the *Enterprise* and a race that's just on the verge of space travel; The Malcorians have finally developed sufficient technology to explore the stars, and it's Picard and company's job to try and make the transition an easy one. The entire episode is presented through

the Malcorians' perspective. The cold open shows us that Riker is already on the planet, in disguise, but he's been injured, and the doctors are trying to make sense of his bizarre features. (I'm not really buying a humanoid race that develops hands with thumbs, but no fingers. Unless they were underwater, this wouldn't be very useful.)

Throughout the episode, we check in on Riker and the effect his presence has on the hospital staff, but apart from his one attempt to escape, we're not seeing what's happening from his point of view, even if he is the only character we recognize.

The rest of the story follows an ideological struggle for the direction of Malcorian society, between Mirasta, who pushes for exploration and advancement; Klora, a conservative who argues passionately for the importance of maintaining traditional values; and Chancellor Durken, who has the unenviable task of finding some kind of middle ground between the two. Their situation is approaching a crisis point, as the country's space program is nearing its crucial breakthrough, so tensions are high. The sudden appearance of Picard and Troi in Mirasta's office doesn't really make things easier, despite their insistent reassurance and offers of guidance. We've seen the transporter effect hundreds of times on the show by now, and there's no big surprise at it here, but the fact that we've seen Mirasta more than we've seen either Picard or Troi by this point in the ep at least makes us realize how impressive teleportation is.

Same goes for Mirasta's trip aboard the *Enterprise*. This is a little reminiscent of "Who Watches The Watchers," in that we once again have a stranger experiencing the technology of the Federation for the first time, but it's easier for us to identify with Mirasta, as the Malcorians are closer to our stage of development. And of course, she's amazed by everything, just as Chancellor Durken is when it's his turn to pay a visit. Sequences like this only really work because we, as an audience, have come to trust the crew of the ship; it's easier to take the wonder and awe of, well, a bunch of stuff we're all familiar with, when we know that Picard and the others really are as good as their word. This is the ideal, and over the course of three-plus seasons, we've seen that the ideal is pretty solid. There's something vaguely Mary Sue-ish about all this but in a fun way. It's hard not to wish we get a visit from an *Enterprise* of our own.

Which isn't to say that Picard doesn't make his share of mistakes. On Mirasta's advice, Picard doesn't tell Durken about Riker's presence on the planet and about the reconnaissance mission that had been studying the Malcorians in preparation for this moment. Which means that when Klora finds out about Riker and tells Durken, things get a little awkward. It's a sound piece of drama, as it allows everyone involved a respectable level of intelligence. Mirasta is a bit arrogant in deciding she knows what's best for her people, but given the reactionary response at the hospital to Riker's alienness, it's hard not to sympathize with her attempts to control the information flow. Picard is simply trusting that she knows her business better than he does, and Durken is understandably frustrated by the subterfuge. There's even an attempt to find sympathy for Klora; his behavior, infuriating as it is (and I really can't stand his kind of argument), is driven both by his fear of what may happen next, and his commitment to doing right by his people. He does some foolish things, but it's still possible to sympathize with him, provided you aren't in the same room.

So, if there's so much to like in "Contact," what are my objections? I can think of a couple, apart from the general bloodlessness I mentioned above. (I like my drama messy, which doesn't really fit with *TNG*'s utopian ideals.) The silly one first: Bebe Neuwirth as the Malcorian with a jones for some alien loving. Now, Bebe Neuwirth is awesome, don't get me wrong, and if any Malcorian were going to successfully sex up Riker, I can believe it would be her. But the scene is woefully misjudged, a broad comedy beat that belongs more in a parody of a *Trek* episode than in an actual *Trek* episode. Like everyone else in the hospital, she's not so much a character as a potential response to a situation. It's just easier to stomach the reflexive violence and paranoia than it is the played-entirely-for-laughs lust. It's not the worst thing ever, but it isn't funny. Thematically, I suppose it serves to show that not everyone on the planet is terrified of aliens, but in practice, it comes off as goofy padding.

My other objection is more serious. The ending is a little too neat. When Krola learns that they have one of the terrifying aliens captive at the hospital, he goes to question Riker, and when Riker doesn't answer his questions, Krola attempts to kill himself, using Riker's phaser and framing Riker for the crime. After learning of this, Durken decides his people aren't ready for the future that the *Enterprise* represents and that they need more time before they open themselves to the universe. So he asks Picard to leave, and Picard agrees.

I appreciate that this isn't the expected resolution and that it's fairly well-justified. Apart from a small handful, most of the Maclorians we meet are irrationally terrified of outsiders, so it follows that Durken would want to protect them. I don't object on a character level, but philosophically, it feels wrong. Social change never happens at the pace we'd like it to happen. It's either slow and fumbling or immediate and explosive, and the idea that Durken can single-handedly repress the scientific development of his race and that he's right to do so seems both naive and misguided. If the Prime Directive is all about prohibiting outsider influence (and I'm not sure how it'd be possible to establish working relations with a planet when you can show them all your shiny toys but refuse to share), there should also be the understanding that one person alone can't decide the course of a species, no matter how noble his intentions. I didn't need "Contact" to necessarily change Durken's decision, or even show it in a negative light, but more ambiguity would've helped.

Which I guess comes back to the bloodless problem I was discussing above. I've come to appreciate *TNG*'s more family-friendly approach to conflict resolution, and this may just be a situation where my personal tastes come into irresolvable conflict with the show's overall goals. But this all felt a little too easy, even with Riker's health problems, as though it were less an episode, and more an hour-long "How To" video for prospective starship captains interested in contacting new civilizations. I wanted Durken to be a little less perfect or Kloria to be a little more effective. Of the bunch, only Mirasta seemed really distinctive, perhaps because she was easier for the writers to understand. And it's nice that she got to leave with the *Enterprise*, because at least then their mission wasn't a total wash. Otherwise, it's a little too close to the end of "Clues," just another closed loop, but for a situation that, in a slightly less perfect galaxy like our own, couldn't possibly have been contained.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Very curious to hear what you all think of "Contact."
- Didn't realize the war with the Klingons was started by a disastrous first contact. Is this the first official confirmation we've had?
- Riker's "I'll call you the next time I pass through your star system." is essentially all my problems with that scene in a single line.

Next week: Geordi meets his holo-hottie in the flesh in "Galaxy's Child," and our heroes suffer from some "Night Terrors."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Galaxy's Child"/"Night Terrors"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[1/06/11 11:50AM](#)

"Galaxy's Child"

Or The One Where I Get Uncomfortable

Geordi La Forge is very excited. Dr. Leah Brahms is coming on board the *Enterprise* to personally study the alterations the Chief Engineer has made to the ship's engines, and even though Geordi has never met Dr. Brahms in person, he's positive they're going to be the best of friends. See, he has a special connection with the good doctor. Back in *TNG*'s third season, the *Enterprise*'s computer created a holographic version of Brahms to help Geordi solve a crisis, and that holographic representation just happened to be a bit on the flirty side. It gave Geordi a new self-confidence, and while one would think that increased esteem would've helped his love life, apparently such is not the case, because now he's super stoked to meet Brahms, and he's convinced they're going to hit it off wonderfully. Oh sure, he says he's just looking to be "friends," but that's just something you say when you're going out of your mind. He's convinced this is true love. All she has to be is exactly what he needs.

"Galaxy's Child" is going to be a tricky episode for me to review. We all have our blind spots; we all have our red flags. Most times, I'm sure I'm not even aware of mine. But a storyline like this is different, because it hits me in a personal way that makes it difficult for me to balance the episode's flaws and strengths against my own vulnerabilities. I'm pretty sure this isn't a classic; I'm also pretty sure that it has some serious problems, and that these problems connect back to some larger concerns I have with the show as a whole. But I also suspect that my intense discomfort for much of the episode is unique to me. While it's true that, specifically speaking, all my reactions are uniquely mine, their intensity here served to unbalance my perception of the entirety of "Child." Or, to put it plainly, I was too busy cringing most of the time to keep both eyes on the screen.

A bit of personal history, then, if you'll indulge me, and I promise it's relevant to the issue at hand. In college, I fell in love with a girl. Let's call her Matilda, because that was really not her name. Matilda was very pretty and very nice, and we did some acting classes together; I was overweight (I looked a bit like a young Philip Seymour Hoffman), but I was very confident when it came to acting, so we became decent friends. At some point, I developed a crush, which was fine. Crushes aren't really fun, but they are generally containable. In my experience, I'd pine for a while, and do some mild obsessing, but it would never go farther than that.

Cut to a year later. I've never really understood how it happened, but through a combination of depression and coincidence, I decided I was in love with Matilda. I can even remember the exact moment; walking from the common room of the suite I lived in with my friends, and thinking, "I'm in love with her. I really am in love with her," and that was pretty much the end of me. Winter break followed soon after, and I spent the whole time trying to understand what was going on, going utterly out of my mind, half blissful, half terrified. Then I come back to school, I find out Matilda has broken up with her boyfriend, and I decide this is a sign. It has to be a sign, right? We go see a movie together (*American Beauty*), and I probably should have known I was off the track when I made to pay her way, and she got uncomfortable. But, like I said, out of my mind. After the movie, I told her I thought we should go out, and she started crying.

Gah, this is taking too long; and besides, none of that is all that unusual. What happened next, though, is something that still terrifies me. Because Matilda said she wasn't interested in me, and I got really sad and scared for a while, and then I decided that, okay, maybe she just wasn't *ready*, y'know? Maybe she just needed space after the break-up. What I felt was so strong, so real, there's no way she couldn't return my feelings, and if I was just patient and respectful, eventually, everything would turn out okay. Which doesn't sound so bad, saying it like that, but it's horrifying to realize you can be so thoroughly misled by your emotions, that my perception of events was so clouded by what I thought I needed, I believed in a false reality for five whole months. It worked out all right in the end. I'm not really the stalking type, so I mostly just broke off contact with Matilda, and then, one day, I came to my senses. But it's still one of the worst times in my life.

So who cares, everybody's got a crappy story like that. Geordi's crush on Brahms is less about misreading obvious signs (although he does do that), and more about assuming a connection where none exists. But then, that's basically what I did with poor Matilda. In my head, we were soul mates, and all information I received was interpreted with that conviction firmly in view. Geordi isn't quite that far gone, but he's certain that he and Brahms are well-matched, even after she's initially cold to him and unhappy with the changes he's made to "her" engines. His smarmy chumminess, the way he keeps using her first name, his petulant frustration that she isn't behaving like he assumed she would, all of this is almost unbearable for me to watch. While I suspect other people may feel the same, this is one of the rare cases when I'm nearly certain my reaction is more intense than most. Like, that dinner date he sets up? Ugh. I watched much of that scene on mute. There were subtitles, but that was as far as I was willing to go. And then, when Brahms finally sees her computer-created doppelganger, well, for a few seconds, I was expecting Geordi was going to have to find a way to hide a body very quickly.

The primary issue here, whatever effect my past may have on my current judgment, is that we should be sympathetic to Geordi's mistakes here, and I don't think we're given good reason to be. It's obviously sad what happens to him, but he keeps walking into his own trap over and over again. If Brahms had been warmer and if Geordi had been more reserved in his expectations, "Child" could have effectively made its point about the dangers of forming attachments to fantasy without alienating us from its hero. But he's just too stupid for words, and that's something that comes up a lot on *TNG* and not just with Geordi. There's a weird sense of childishness that runs through the cast whenever the writers decide they want to impart a moral lesson. When I went kind of crazy, I was still in college and not quite into my twenties. Geordi is, what, late twenties, early thirties? He's been on the *Enterprise* for a few years now; he's had dates. And yet it doesn't even occur to him that Brahms might not be what he's expecting. This is the

behavior of someone who's painfully inexperienced in dealing with human beings, and while I buy that Geordi is a dork, I don't buy that he's an idiot. It's hard to feel very sorry for him, because he doesn't even try to respect Brahms' wishes until he has no other choice.

Or maybe that's just me; maybe I relate too closely to his circumstance not to despise him a little for it, in the way I can't help despising myself a little when I remember the past. Still, the Geordi/Brahms interactions would have worked better if they'd been handled with greater subtlety. I'm not sure I buy that she'd be so willing to be pals after everything was over. I can see her not hating him, and I can see her getting over her discomfort, but the brief moment of chemistry they have at the end, before her husband calls and ruins everything? Eh, I dunno.

There was a whole other plotline here, and, thank god, this one doesn't bring up any bad memories. The *Enterprise* is forced to kill a living ship, which distresses Picard to no end. Thankfully, the dead living ship was pregnant, and, with the help of some deft phaser work, the *Enterprise* helps set the baby free. Less good, the baby mistakes the *Enterprise* for its mother, latching on to the ship's hull and draining its power reserves for sustenance. It's a clever story made all the more effective by the sincerity of Picard's distress. He's not just disappointed when they accidentally kill the living ship, he's *devastated*, and his commitment to the ideals of exploration and the preservation of life gives a weight to what happens here. *TOS* was all about survival in the explored reaches of space, but *TNG* is more concerned with the ideals that make survival worthwhile.

So that's nice. Still, I can't get past the other part of the storyline, for reasons which should be clear now. Credit where it's due: The idea of Geordi meeting Brahms in the flesh is a good one, and it's completely believable that their meeting wouldn't go entirely as he planned. But the execution left a lot to be desired.

Grade: C+

Stray Observations:

- Guinan: "You saw exactly what you wanted to see on the holodeck." Which is basically what the holodeck is *for*. Can you imagine how creepy it would be for a movie star in the age of holographic simulation? Every fan would have an extensive personal relationship with their fantasy of you, one that had been repeatedly reinforced by a completely lifelike version of yourself who always said whatever they wanted to hear.
- I'm sure Geordi is supposed to come off as misguided here, but my problem is, as with "The Loss," the deconstruction of his character goes too far for me. I actively disliked him for three-quarters of the episode, and I don't think *TNG* is a show that can really support that level of antipathy.

"Night Terrors"

Or *The One With Snakes*, *Why'd It Have To Be Snakes?*

Night terrors, eh? Once again, I must apologize, as I have suffered from night terrors in the past, and this great and tragic suffering of mine makes impossible for me to adequately judge the sight of Riker hallucinating a bed full of snakes. Or Picard hearing his door buzzing repeatedly. Or Chief O'Brien thinking his wife is cheating on him. I've lived too closely all these horrors, and as such, cannot comment upon them, but merely bask in their ugliness. Bask, I tells yah. Just... *bask*.

Actually, I really have had night terrors before, but this is less an episode about a familiar real-world phenomenon than it is one that gives writers an excuse to throw out some random scary scenes and then wave them all away with zero consequences. For whatever its faults, "Galaxy's Child" at least told a story that related directly to the crew of the *Enterprise*. The conflict with the living spaceship required Picard and his bridge crew's commitment to the

sanctity of life to be suspenseful (otherwise they could've just blasted the alien and gone about their merry way), and, of course, Geordi's troubled relationship with the object of his assumptions was a very personal plotline. That's not really the case in "Terrors." Troi's Betazoid abilities are important, and Data's invulnerability to problems that affect other humanoids probably saves the life of everyone on board, but overall, this is a sort of "could happen to anyone" story, and that makes it somewhat less thrilling.

Still, it starts off well enough. The *Enterprise* comes across the *USS Britain*, a ship that's been marked missing in Starfleet records, in deep space. Troi senses something is wrong and accompanies Riker and the away team when they beam over to the ship. They find a lot of bad news: bodies everywhere, murdered in surprisingly gory ways, and one near comatose Betazoid. The Betazoid appears physically unharmed but scared out of his mind and unable to explain exactly what killed everyone on board the *Britain*. Beverly gets to work on some autopsies, Troi tries to communicate with her fellow empath, but while the causes of the catastrophe are unclear, the danger to the *Enterprise* is not; the ship is trapped in a kind of energy vortex, and soon, everyone on board starts losing their focus, growing more irritable and experiencing waking nightmares.

That's a classic *Trek* premise right there: random space thingie threatens the lives of our heroes and makes them vulnerable in ways that can't be defeated by phaser fire or negotiation. And "Terrors" does an excellent job of conveying the mind-numbing unpleasantness of insomnia. The transition from normalcy to exhaustion is done with a gratifying amount of... well, subtlety isn't exactly the right word, but the changeover happens quickly, and there's not a lot of hand-holding to make sure we know that the beeping door in Picard's office or O'Brien's paranoia about his wife's fidelity are indicators of degraded mental states. Patrick Stewart, in particular, looks utterly wretched by the end of the episode, a small, defeated man who mostly seems held together by the uniform he's wearing. A few missteps aside (snakes? really?), the night terror sequences themselves are effectively creepy. I especially liked Beverly's morgue freak-out; it reminded me a bit of *Re-Animator*, which is a good thing.

But then, I don't think we've ever seen that morgue before. That's not hugely odd; the *Enterprise* doesn't generally run into situations that require storage space for a whole roomful of bodies. Still, in creating a new space to show how the lack of REM sleep affects the good doctor, the episode demonstrates one of its fundamental problems. The "night terrors" would be an excellent way to get into the heads of the main cast, to expose them in ways that their professionalism and competence normally leave hidden. Instead, we just get a lot of disappointingly generic scary sequences, which have less to do with the individual than they do with freaking out the audience. O'Brien's paranoia isn't brilliant (it's odd how the show considers him and Keiko familiar enough to keep returning to), but it's at least a problem that's directly connected to what we know about him.

It's just too bad we don't see that intimacy with the rest of the crew. Picard is bothered by a doorbell that won't stop ringing, and by the lights in the elevator. I liked the doorbell bit well enough. It walks a neat line between irritating and unsettling. But surely, given Picard's rich history on the show, we could've found something more interesting to get under his skin than "Ugh, the ceiling is too bright!" Beverly's encounter with corpse sit-ups is connected to her only in the sense that, as a doctor, she's around corpses from time to time. And with Riker, we get a bed full of snakes. Really? Unless he turned into Indiana Jones when I wasn't looking, I don't see how that's relevant. Admittedly, an episode in which each character suffered from their greatest fear has the potential of being awful enough in its own way, translating complicated worries and paranoia into simplistic fantasy. But at least those fantasies would be distinct. Too much of "Night Terrors" could've been done on any other genre show without a lot of script edits.

It turns out that a ship trapped on the other side of the space anomaly that sucked in the *Enterprise*—it's called a "Tyken's Rift," if you're curious—is sending out telepathic messages that make nearly everyone on board the *Enterprise* (and the *Britain* before it) incapable of REM sleep. Hence the exhaustion and the hallucinations. But

this effect isn't being done to cause harm; the other ship is just trying to communicate a way in which it and our heroes can work together to escape the Rift, as neither ship can do so under its own power. It's just too bad the messages have the inadvertent effect of driving people crazy. Betazoids can interpret the signals the phantom ship is sending, although this didn't help the Betazoid that Troi finds on the *Britain*; either he was unable to interpret what was happening, or his pure-Betazoid genetics made the message too powerful for him to handle. Whatever the reason, Troi herself, with Beverly's help (I like how the two of them occasionally team up) has to find some way of using her dreams to effectively communicate with the aliens, or else everybody on both ships is doomed.

Oh hey, in all my complaining, I forgot there was another character whose woes in "Terrors" are specific to himself: Worf! We don't actually see any of his hallucinations, but we do see how his growing fear and loss of self-control nearly drive him to suicide. So that's pretty cool. And Guinan has an absolutely ridiculous gun that she busts out to keep the peace in Ten-Forward, and there's definitely entertainment value in that. The final sequence, with Troi desperately trying to send the right message in her sleep while Data essentially runs the entire ship, is thrilling, even if it does follow the model of most climaxes on the show with lots of desperate cutting back and forth, and it looks like everything is lost riiiiight up till the moment when it isn't. (Which is, admittedly, the climax to roughly two-thirds of genre series episode ever produced. I just mention it here because it's somewhat similar to the end of "Galaxy's Child.") And it's neat how Data's invulnerability here works in the *Enterprise*'s favor, where last week it nearly got everyone on board killed.

Overall, this was entertaining, and enjoyably well-paced. It just feels a little too bloodless, even with those mutilated corpses at the beginning. This is the same style of episode as "Clues," in a way, because the problems here are nearly entirely external. No one needs to learn any valuable lessons about themselves, and nobody's short-sightedness is to blame for what happens. I think I enjoyed "Clues" a little more, because I dig the weirdness of intentionally erasing a chunk of your memory, and I love the idea of episodes that give us knowledge about our heroes that our heroes will never have for themselves. "Terrors" was arguably more intense, and the sense of otherness in the aliens was more interesting (although again, Troi gets zapped), but it lacked that mild twist at the end to make it memorable. This kind of episode is really the meat-and-potatoes of this sort of show, so it's impressive to realize that *TNG* has gotten to the point where delivering the expected is no longer entirely satisfactory. Given how rich a galaxy the show has built for itself, why should we waste so much time on aliens who can't be bothered to have personalities?

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- "There's no technology to block telepathic communications." You'd think there would be, though. Given that this is a reality in which telepathy is a proven fact, you'd think that governments would've funneled crazy amounts of resources into finding a way to keep their secrets secret. I mean, Utopian or no, there are still occasional wars.
- You go to hell, Tom Corbin. You go to hell and you *die*.

Next week: We suffer through an "Identity Crisis," and Barclay's return in "The Nth Degree."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Identity Crisis"/"The Nth Degree"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[1/13/11 10:00AM](#)

"Identity Crisis"

Or The One Where Geordi Gets An Injection That Doesn't Agree With Him

Space must be absolutely filthy. At least, that's what I've always suspected. Neither *TOS* or *TNG* have spent much time dealing with the potential dangers of alien environments, or the seemingly inevitable difficulties involved in interspecies contact (hey, remember the bio-suits in "The Naked Time"? Yeah, nobody else on either show did). And probably that's for the best. There's a potentially amazing hard sci-fi show about what interstellar travel might be like that focuses on the strict realities of the situation, but the *Trek* franchise isn't about hard sci-fi. It's more concerned with adventure stories and characters, and problems with varying degrees of plausible foundation. There's nothing wrong with that; I have fun poking holes in the absurdities (seriously, the holodeck is *insane*), but generally speaking, those absurdities don't diminish my enjoyment of the show unless they get really, really egregious. It's like Larry Niven's famous essay, "Man of Steel, Woman of Kleenex," about the impossibility of a sexual relationship between Lois Lane and Superman. It's interesting to think about, but it doesn't really damage the narrative itself. (*Superman Returns* did that just fine, thanks.)

Still, I enjoy those few episodes when *TNG* does decide to dabble in the complications of exploration, and "Identity Crisis" fits quite well in this mini-genre. We're not talking Stanislaw Lem levels of ambiguity here, but the story is thoughtful enough that it stands above many of *TNG's* other mystery-based eps. An alien life form is causing problems for Geordi and some old shipmates, and that life-form doesn't turn out to be the latest variation on the godlike-being. Just the opposite, in fact. There's some clever writing here, and Geordi gets to look smart instead of creepy. Plus, there are cool invisible monsters who glow in the dark, and not one of them attempts to psychically violate Troi. Seems like a win in my book.

A few years back, Geordi was on an away team that investigated some disappearances on planet Tarchannen III. They weren't able to find anything (and while it isn't very dramatically satisfying, it would be nice if the *Enterprise* occasionally stumbled upon a completely inexplicable mystery—although, again, that's the sort of plot that would better suited to a more serious show), but now, here in the present, something's gone wrong. Three people from that original group have vanished, two of them stealing a shuttle to escape. Now Susanna Leitjen, the commander of the away team and Geordi's former superior officer, has joined up with the *Enterprise* to return to Tarchannen and see if there's any sign of the missing.

In talking about "Night Terrors," I criticized the show for making the crew's hallucinations so impersonal and generic. That's a fine line to walk, however, because not every crisis on the series needs to be unique for the individuals in question. There's no particular reason why Geordi should be the main character here. It makes sense given his station on the ship, and his relative youth, that he had an experience in his recent past working under another captain, and Geordi does seem more vulnerable than, say, Worf or Riker. (And Data, of obvious reasons.) But it's possible to imagine an iteration of this story with Riker going through the same problems. The biggest difference is that Geordi busts out some computer science to try and figure out the root cause for what's going on, but the actual issue itself isn't character specific.

Which is cool, really. "Crisis" could've maybe done something with how Geordi's affliction, caused by an alien spore that changes him into a different species, reflects his own occasional alienation from the human race, but that would've been a stretch. This is an episode in which the story is the primary interest, and the characters serve largely to move that story around, as opposed to, say, "Family," in which the characters come first. *TNG* can do both kinds of show. The key difference that sets "Crisis" above something like "Night Terrors" isn't that it's more personally connected to Geordi; it's that the plot is just more interesting. That's really the only requirement here. If you're going to make the story the focus, so long as our heroes aren't breaking out of character or anything, all that matters is that the story be worth our attention.

This one works, for a couple of reasons. The aliens, who never get an official name, are appropriately cool, creatures capable of camouflaging themselves to the point of near invisibility (the effect we see is basically the Predator), and then going all glowing veins and bugged out eyes when you hit them with a black light. It's ridiculous, but I'll be honest with you: I like ridiculousness in alien design from time to time. These are still humanoids, albeit with fewer fingers, but at least we didn't get the standard "slap some latex on the forehead and call it good" make-up. As for the cause of the transformations, the idea that these creatures procreate by infecting other life forms with their genetic code is, well, even more ridiculous than those glowing veins. It's the biological version of the Borg, and while I'm not sure how practical it would actually be (we never really know anything about the life forms on Tarchannen; are there other humanoid races? And what happens when one of these guys tries to infect something significantly smaller than itself?), it doesn't actually need to be that practical. Maybe this is just some bizarre genetic experiment gone wrong.

The other reason "Crisis" works is that the story takes some unexpected turns. There aren't any huge shocks; once you find out that three members of the away team disappeared, and see Susanna succumbing to the same condition, you know it's only a matter of time before the symptoms start hitting Geordi. But before that happens, we get to watch Geordi using old footage of the away team to try and find any clue of what went wrong. His focus, and the smart way he goes about his search, are engaging and, in their way, quietly thrilling. Weirdly enough, if you look back once the ep is over, Geordi's discoveries are basically irrelevant. Via the holodeck, he determines that someone else was hiding in plain sight on the planet, but it's Beverly who determines the real cause of the problem, and once she cures Susanna, Susanna is able to tell everyone what happened, and what needs to happen next. But Geordi's efforts are entertaining enough to justify their existence. It's arguably padding, but it's the best kind of padding. Once Susanna collapses, nothing critical really occurs until she's human again, and leads an away team down to the planet

to try and find Geordi before his transformation becomes irreversible. But seeing that shadow come to "life" is compelling and creepy, so the scenes between those two points don't feel like wasted time.

There are nits to pick here. We don't really know much about Susanna, and her relationship with Geordi becomes so dramatically important by the end that it would've been nice to have a better sense of her. (It might've made more sense to have someone from the *Enterprise* talk Geordi back down off the genetic ledge; the idea of Data struggling to make an emotional connection with his friend would've been more dramatic, and would've had some nice thematic depth as well.) It's odd that the infection takes different amounts of time to finish people off, since everyone in the away team was hit with the spores at roughly the same time. Also, why this many years? It's clear that the missing personnel who prompted the original away team search had completed their transformations before Geordi and the others arrived. Does that mean that Starfleet just ignored their disappearance for long enough for the infection to take hold?

But really, "Crisis" is the kind of solid, intriguing *TNG* that I've come to expect from the series at this point. It uses technology in a smart way, it gives us a problem that the ship hasn't encountered before, and it moves at a good pace. Plus, it's nice reminder that other worlds can be dangerous even if you don't see what's coming. I doubt anyone on the *Enterprise* will be that much more careful when beaming down into unknown territory, but maybe they'll count the shadows on the walls around them a little more often.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Funny, I don't remember anyone ever video taping away team missions before.
- Further evidence in the "Data is developing emotions on his own without the benefit of a special chip, thankyouverymuch" file: he's clearly worried about Geordi.
- Anybody else get *Blade Runner* flashbacks while Geordi was going through the videos?

"The Nth Degree"

Or *The One Where Barclay Gets A Brain, A Heart, And The Noive*

Ah. Barclay episode. Unleash the awkward!

Y'know, I don't get why I don't like Barclay. I *should* like him; I generally like characters who don't fit into their fictional worlds properly, and Barclay is the only character we've ever seen on the *Enterprise* who doesn't. I appreciate him conceptually, I appreciate the honesty of having someone like him around on the ship. Everyone on board just seems so perfect and smart and resourceful, it would be tremendously stressful to not quite live up to those expectations. I don't have any problems with Dwight Schultz. But man alive, I can't translate that theoretical appreciation into anything approaching actual entertainment. Much like Geordi's run in with Brahms last week, there are interesting ideas here that keep tripping over *TNG*'s basic unwillingness to acknowledge the darker undercurrents of its characters. Barclay is supposed to be pathetic, but endearingly so; in practice, he's just pathetic, a middle-aged man who acts like a fourteen year-old boy, stammering around women, retreating into a terrifyingly vivid fantasy life.

Thankfully, that fantasy life has been put aside for "The Nth Degree," which opens with an effective fake-out: Barclay playing Cyrano De Bergerac to Beverly's Roxane. At first, it looks like he's engaging in some more holodeck creepiness, but while Barclay was confident in his electronic delusions, here he's as clumsy and forced as ever. We pull back to see this is a bit of theater, being performed for some of the ship's crew. Which makes it less creepy, but still not much fun to watch. I have an aversion to cringe comedy, but even if I didn't, this doesn't strike

me as a great example of the genre; Barclay's fumbles and miscues are as obviously phony as the lines of poetry he spouts, so it's like mixing bad jokes with embarrassment, and, well, ugh. About the only funny bit here is Data's bafflement when the audience applauds the scene's conclusion.

Thankfully, "Degree" isn't the story of how Barclay takes a ragtag group of untrained actors and manages to bring them to the Federation Semi-Finals for Theater, or whatever. Instead, we have a *Flowers For Algernon* riff, something that's long been a staple of genre shows. While investigating a downed Argus Array, a subspace telescope, Barclay gets electrocuted by an alien probe, and starts to develop increased mental faculties—not just intelligence, but creativity, empathy, all sorts of wonderful things. Those special abilities which, after an initially difficult transition period, gradually win him the admiration of the crew, ultimately set him apart once again, as he becomes too smart for anyone around to keep up with him. Then he seemingly becomes a danger to the ship itself, merging with the *Enterprise's* computer and discovering a new form of faster-than-warp travel. Picard and the others try and talk him down, all efforts fail, and CyBarclay throws the ship 30,000 light years of course, where they meet the delightful condescending super genius floating head that caused all this mess in the first place.

Daniel Keyes left this last bit out his (somewhat more tragic) novel, but the episode shares with *Algernon* that initial rush of freedom in seeing a loser suddenly become a god, only to realize that godhood ain't all its cracked up to be. It's all about the disenfranchised finding power in an unexpected way, and the beats, while familiar, are still satisfying in their way. Whatever problems I have with Barclay, it was nice to see him finally getting to show off a bit, and equally nice to see Geordi's reaction to his showing off. It's the closest the episode really comes to admitting one of the reasons they keep Barclay around. When Reg saves the ship (after Geordi decides it's hopeless) from the probe's attack, Geordi is clearly frustrated. Partly it's because Barclay jumped around his authority to get the job done, but there's probably also a little bit of irritation that the twerp stepped out of his place. Geordi may have his problems socializing, but, in normal situations, he's a lot smoother than Captain Nerve Twitch. The resentment is a subtle, but effective, character beat.

It all gets a bit goofy, of course. Barclay creates a simulation of Einstein in the holodeck to bounce a few ideas off of. He also turns into an amazing actor, charming the proverbial pants off his former teacher. (Schultz's "real" performance of the Cyrano monologue is all right, but man, Beverly looks like she's about to... I dunno. I doubt she'd jump him, but this episode did a very good job of reminding me why I kind of have a crush on her.) That it all turns out to be part of some alien plan to make contact is somewhat lazy, as it gives us one of the worst aspects of the god-like beings: a convenient, dry-erase board approach that, aside from a cute gag at the end, makes sure "Degree" is largely consequence free. (Actually, I can't say this for certain. Is Barclay notably more intelligent in later appearances?)

I don't have a whole lot to say here; I've ragged on poor Reg enough, and really, once he gets a hit of brain steroids, he's a lot more tolerable than normal. (Well, once he gets past the brain steroids and stops randomly shouting information at people.) As always, we have to look to the edges for the most interesting aspects of the episode, and this one has some surprisingly charming moments. The group discussion about just how dangerous CyBarclay is the expected, "Let's try and be rational" scene that happens a lot on *TNG*, and it's always appreciated; it creates a sense of community, and of organization, that helps foster world-building. Like, we deal with crazy shit all the time, we've got the protocols in place to deal with it. There's a great bit when Troi tells everyone that Barclay made a pass at her ("A good one,"), and Riker gets overly concerned. Y'know, charming.

Lessee... It's somewhat embarrassing that it takes everyone as long as it does to realize that Barclay's electrocution did more than just knock him temporarily unconscious, but since he's such a weird one to begin with, that isn't that hard to understand. And besides, a Barclay who doesn't practically weep every time someone talks to him for more than five minutes is probably not something to be questioned too intently. While I wasn't a huge fan of the

Cytherians (the one we see is so close to being a Muppet that I wish he had actually been a Muppet), it's great that the *Enterprise* spends a few weeks hanging out with them before moving on; I love the idea that, again, this isn't that big of a deal. The Cytherians are incredibly advanced, but our heroes run into advanced races all the time. You take what they give you, and then you move on.

Still, the Cytherians method of exploration—bringing other races to them, instead of the other way around—seems a bit rude, and it's hard to imagine it going over well with everyone. (The Romulans would freak out, I'm guessing, although they'd probably try to hide their displeasure long enough to steal whatever potential weapons tech they could find.) This is a passable episode, but it doesn't do much in the way of following through on its implications, and the few pleasures it has live entirely on the surface. Barclay's first episode, for all its many faults, at least tried to give us something we hadn't seen before on the show, a loser who was so pathetic that you had to work to like him. "Degree" doesn't have the same ambition. It's easier to watch, but harder to remember.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- Someone mentioned it in the comments last week, and I agree: Barclay's "No problem, here's how you build it" to the computer was great.
- "How do you feel now?" "Smaller."
- Next week, we see some familiar faces in "Qpid" and learn to bang "The Drumhead."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Qpid"/"The Drumhead"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[1/20/11 10:15AM](#)

"Qpid"

Or The One Where I Miss Alan Rickman, But Not Kevin Costner

Look, this is a completely inoffensive episode. Aside from some intermittently amusing comedy, the entertaining hamminess of John de Lancie, and the return of Picard's occasional love interest, Vash, there's really nothing here. Oh, sure, we get some silliness with the cast dressed as characters from *Robin Hood*, but there's no thematic depth, no tension, and no consequences. There's no sexism to complain about and no distractingly uncomfortable subtext. Just light-enough-to-be-practically-weightless silliness. I didn't find it hugely entertaining, mainly because I think Picard and Vash's relationship is about as believable as, well, any other romantic relationship on this show, but I can't think of any concrete reasons why it would irritate me. Oh sure, bad comedy is *always* annoying, but there are actually some decent jokes here, most of them centered on Worf. ("Sir, I protest. I am *not* a Merry Man!" was great, but I also enjoyed the *Animal House*-inspired lute smashing and his casual, "Nice legs. For a human.")

And yet, sitting down to write this review, I am a little irritated. Partly it's because there's not a whole lot here to unpack. Vash's subversion of Q's gameplan is intriguing, but it quickly settles back into the expected "damsel in distress" rhythms. It's cute that they end up together in the end, I suppose. Although the odds of Q getting bored and conveniently forgetting her on some planet no one's ever heard of seem fairly high. I could write about Robin Hood, but really, "Qpid" is basically just stealing some set-ups from the Errol Flynn movie (which gave us Basil Rathbone as Sir Guy of Gisbourne), and then there's a castle. The context is meaningless, and, since Q is running the show, there's no threat. In his first few appearances, Q was mercurial and potentially deadly, but now, he's just comic relief. While he made vaguely ominous comments about blood being spilt, there's no concern that anyone in the crew is

going to be seriously injured. Q is no longer an unknown quantity. We understand what essentially drives him, and that he'll only go so far.

Still, I suppose "Qpid" doesn't need casualties (or a potential for casualties) to be entertaining. But still, there's that irritation. It's not really anger. It's not even sharply negative. It's more frustration that a talented cast and crew were wasting their time on something that sort of just sat there for forty minutes, eating a hole in the schedule. *TNG* has done episodes of this quality before, and it will certainly do episodes like this again, but usually, there's some hook or odd quirk or weird runner for me to fixate on. Maybe there's something here, and I'm just not seeing it. Mostly, this episode just feels lazy, even if it isn't particularly annoying or tedious. The sudden injection of Sherwood Forest doesn't have much to do with anything, and Q's attempts to teach Picard a lesson about the dangers of romance seem half-assed, even for him. More than anything else, it feels like somebody wanted to write a holodeck episode, but then remembered we hadn't had a Q episode this season, so what the hell.

The plot, such as it is: Picard is giving a speech to a bunch of archaeologists about some ruins on the planet Targus III, which nobody is allowed to ever visit. He is, unsurprisingly, stressed about giving this speech. (Troi has one of her classic "GAH SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP" moments here when she essentially lectures the Captain on getting to bed.) (Note: I don't hate Troi. I just find it exceptionally easy to pretend as I though I do.) Then Vash shows up, partly to flirt, partly because she wants to find some way to sneak into those famed ruins and do a bit of grave-robbing. The expected squabbling/romantic tension ensues, and we get some weird forced drama when an exceptionally lovely Beverly Crusher shows up for morning tea at Picard's, only to find Jean-Luc already entertaining a new conquest. Or something to that effect. Anyway, Picard hasn't really told any of his friends on the *Enterprise* about Vash, which, seeing as how Picard rarely divulges any personal information to anyone who doesn't absolutely need it, isn't that surprising. But Vash is a little hurt that he hadn't thought to mention her. Seeing as how, so far as I can tell, they only had a weekend together, I'm not sure what her deal is, but women, right? Ha-ha, something something horribly sexist. Riker proves once again that he'll hit on anything that moves (seriously, Vash is in Ten-Forward for all of a minute before he swoops in), and Vash enjoys poking around. So, if it wasn't for the title and the cast list, it would look like this is what the episode's going to be: Picard and Vash spar, Vash vies to get exactly what she wants without entirely betraying her lover, and it all ends with what may or may not be a subtle implication of successful coitus.

Except Q shows up, and he wants to do Picard a favor, or else he's bored, which basically amount to the same thing. After they have their usual conversation (it's like Dennis the Menace and Mr. Wilson, only Dennis can fold space-time in on itself, and Mr. Wilson gave up on the comb-over), Q zaps the main ensemble and Vash into a simulated Sherwood, assigning roles at random, although none of the woman apart from Vash are cast as named characters. Vash-Marian is being held captive at Sir Guy's castle; he intends to marry her or execute her on the morrow. Amusingly, Vash nearly short-circuits Q's plotting by first agreeing to marry Sir Guy and then turning Picard in when he shows up at the castle to rescue her. Of course it's all part of her own game, and Q catches her trying to get a message to Riker and the others. So it's up to the crew to rescue their captain and his lover using swords and fisticuffs and various shouts.

I'm doing more plot summary here than I usually do, I realize. But honestly, that's all I got. Like I said, it's briefly unexpected when Vash throws tradition to the wind and accepts Sir Guy's proposal. This is the sort of character moment that makes me like her more than just about anything else she's done on the show; the kid-friendly femme fatale routine is amusing, but it gets old. Vash behaves logically and cleverly, and briefly, the episode rises above routine. Briefly, it becomes more than just marking time.

I'll admit that the sudden transition from the *Enterprise* to the woods is very odd, and if I hadn't known it was coming, I may have been more delighted by it. It was nice to have some continuity with Vash, and I continue to

appreciate that she's (somewhat) age-appropriate for Picard. But while it may make me a bad fan, I just don't particularly care about Jean-Luc's love life, and Vash, for all her cleverness, isn't compelling enough to make me care. I wasn't hugely bored here, and I did laugh a couple times. But while I don't expect every episode to be as intense as, say, "The Drumhead," I need some reason for a story to exist beyond, "Hey, let's dress everybody up in community theater period costumes!" Casual plotting can be fun, and a hang-out episode every now and again is good for a series like this. But this one was all about exploring a relationship that didn't matter and resolving a question no one had asked.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- I will say that Troi and Beverly both looked quite fetching in Merry Men outfits. Also, if this episode had just been Worf walking around dressed as Will Scarlett, it would've been much better.
- And once again, Worf tries to fight someone and gets injured just to prove to the crew that they're in danger.
- "This human emotion: love." Yes, because we've never met any other race on the show with a concept of "love" before.
- "He wants to do something nice for me." "I'll alert the crew."
- "I would've taken my own life, but for you." "We all make mistakes."
- "I'm in no mood for your foolishness, Q." Yes, and that is so different from the 10 million other times you've said it.

"The Drumhead"

Or The One Where The Truth We Want Isn't The Truth We Need

It's easier to expect the worst in people because they so rarely disappoint. Most folks aren't inherently evil or cruel, but we can often be selfish and short-sighted, and if you go through life looking for these qualities in the strangers you meet, you'll find them. Partly because we're hardwired that way—biology dictates a certain level of self-interest—but also because innocence is as difficult to prove as a negative. Once you presume guilt, life will conform to your assumptions, and the longer you cling to them, the more desperately important it becomes for those assumptions to remain true. Because if you're wrong, if others are capable of dignity and nobility and honor, what does that make you? What kind of monster could look at the world and only see its shadow?

"The Drumhead" is about how our prejudices and need for redemption color our ability to effectively parse information, and worse, how our expectations can blind us to the cost of our actions. It's powerful, dramatic, and moving. It's also a shade on the didactic side, at least if we're going by the dialogue-as-written. Picard gives any number of speeches about the dangers of overeager prosecution, and while the episode does a decent job in justifying the actions of its chief antagonist, it doesn't really do much in the way of making her sympathetic once the tables start turning. Once again, the *Enterprise* proves to be a bastion of sanity in a universe full of corrupt politicians and obsessives, and once again, if it wasn't for Picard, everyone would probably just go flat-out insane. But it works. You might be getting tired of how often I praise Patrick Stewart in these write-ups, but so much of this series wouldn't work without him as the center; it's hard to think of many other actors pulling off the heavy thematic lifting that's required of him here. (Shatner would've been entertaining, and passionate, but he would've heightened the overly-direct dialogue, rather than made it more effectively naturalistic.) Picard carries the episode, with some excellent assisting work from guest star Jean Simmons. And Worf gets to have a moral conflict, which is nice for him.

"Drumhead" hits the ground running, with a cold open that takes place after an event that one would normally assume to be the focus of the episode: A saboteur aboard the ship has apparently stolen design plans and caused an explosion in the engine room. The likely suspect, a Klingon xenobiologist, has already been taken into custody, and we start with his interrogation. The Klingon, J'Dan, denies his guilt, but he doesn't try very hard, and when he mocks Worf later in private, it's pretty obvious that the bad guy has already been caught here. J'Dan takes too much pride in his contempt, and he soon admits to providing information to the Romulans.

So, there you have it, really. Not much of a mystery left to explore. Except there was that explosion in Engineering, and J'Dan vehemently denies any involvement in it. Why would he lie about that? Maybe there was someone else working with him on the *Enterprise*, and maybe that someone decided to cover their tracks by damaging the ship. (I'm not sure if I'm reading too much into this or not, but it fits in with the plot of the episode that this explosion really wouldn't provide much in the way of tactical value. If it had been intentional, I suppose J'Dan could have intended there to be more significant damage and to be off the ship when it happened, but when the explosion is ultimately proven to be just an unfortunate coincidence, that coincidence doesn't seem convenient to the point of contrivance. It's just that the timing of events is close enough to be bad for everybody.)

Starfleet sends Admiral Norah Satie (Simmons) to help aid Picard in his investigation of the disturbance. Satie brings with her two aides (one of them a Betazed) and an invisible chip on her shoulder roughly the size of one of your angrier continents. She's perfectly pleasant at first, of course, bonding quickly with Picard, telling him that she hadn't initially liked the idea of working with someone else, but she respects him and thinks they make a good team. There's something very brittle about her, though. Simmons plays the role very well. She brings a prim, precise presence to all her performances, and Satie is no exception. In the same scene where she tells Picard she's pleased to be working with him, the two talk about her father, and it's not hard to see what drives the admiral and how her need for justice could curdle into something more like contempt.

While Satie's pursuit of the "truth" (and her persecution of anyone who stands in her way) turns into a witch hunt very quickly, she remains well-motivated. I said earlier that Satie wasn't as sympathetic as she should've been; this isn't entirely true. The final shot we see of her, alone in the courtroom after her supporters have abandoned her, is moving in all the right ways. But I do think the episode makes her shift from legitimate inquiry to pointless, self-fulfilling accusation, too easy to spot. Her victim, poor Simon Tarses, is too obviously innocent. This sort of modulation is very tricky to pull off, so the episode doesn't really lose points for being overly obvious. But as Picard says at the end, the danger of people like Satie—and, in a way, the tragedy of them—is how easy they are to follow over the cliff. "Drumhead" makes it too simple for viewers to draw the line between what's right, and what's expedient. While *TNG* has never been afraid of outlining its moral conflicts in primary colors, the level of performances here are so good, and the central concept so powerful, that it's hard not to wish the issues had been handled with a little more subtlety.

Thankfully, what we do get is still very satisfying. Satie is determined to root out what she perceives as a conspiracy aboard the *Enterprise*. Geordi and Data eventually determine that the explosion in Engineering was caused by an equipment malfunction, but the admiral is having none of that. There's a problem here; she's sure of it, and it's her duty to root it out. She finds her first weed, the aforementioned Tarses, a crewman who works in Sick Bay and had some dealings with J'Dan. (J'Dan's spying efforts are a kind of MacGuffin, in that their only real relevance to the plot is as a motivation for others' actions. The fact that he used amino acids to transfer information, though, is unbelievably cool. It's that sort of attention to detail that makes this show such a pleasure to watch when it's firing on all cylinders, and, I suspect, adds to my frustration with genial shoulder-shrugs like "Qpid.") During Tarses' initial interrogation, he's forthcoming but nervous, and Satie's Betazed assistant senses that he's concealing something. So she decides to hound him, with no other evidence than "feelings," until his reason for nervousness becomes clear: He lied on his job application, pretending he had a Vulcan grandfather instead of a Romulan one.

All sorts of fascinating stuff going on here. I may have been too quick to dismiss J'Dan's biological transmissions as mere plot ornamentation. It's the blood that's in question here, and it's the blood that both men are trying to hide. J'Dan's subterfuge essentially calls everything into question, as it conceals information under the skin, tainting whoever carries it, whether they realize it or not. Satie proves Tarses was willing to lie about his heritage to further his career. What else might he be willing to conceal about his biology?

Plus, there's Satie's use of a Betazed counselor and Picard's unwillingness to use that counselor's judgment alone to determine Tarses' guilt. As Satie points out, Picard has often used Troi in the past to get a read on others in difficult situations. (In fact, Troi is present during J'Dan's interrogation at the beginning of the episode.) But there's something different about this. Satie isn't simply taking into account her assistant's interpretation of Tarses' emotional weather; she's using that interpretation to justify her own conviction that someone is guilty here and that someone needs to be blamed. I've made fun of Troi's somewhat useless presence on the *Enterprise*, but this scene is one of the few times that uselessness seems less a function of the writers inability to handle the character properly (which I think it generally is) and more an intentional choice on Picard's part. However reliable the Betazed intuition is, it's still just one person's word against another. Given how difficult it is to read emotions even under ideal circumstances, simply saying, "I sense he's hiding something" doesn't justify destroying a man's life. And Tarses' life *is* destroyed, or at least his career is; it's one of the stronger points of "The Drumhead" that it doesn't compromise on the costs of Satie's vehemence.

And then, of course, there's Picard. He's a little like Henry Fonda at the start of *12 Angry Men* here. While I don't doubt Riker or any of the rest of his crew (apart from Worf, who is seduced by Satie's conviction, and by his own need to prove himself) would stand behind their captain, the episode purposefully isolates Picard for much of the running time as the quiet voice of reason in an increasingly shout-based universe. Most anyone else in this role might've seemed nearly as self-righteous as Satie does, but Stewart has that whole unassuming dignity thing down cold. Even more important is the slow spread of grief across his features. It's a process that takes nearly half the episode to come to fruition, as he does his best to placate both sides, to give everyone the benefit of the doubt. Stewart plays Picard here not as a man just bothered by an injustice but horrified by it; his heroism is less boldness and more the calm decency we all should aspire to. He gets a lot of heavy chewing, monologue-wise, but by underplaying those monologues, by routinely showing Picard's shock and dismay and only letting his anger rise to the surface near the very end, Stewart heightens the sense of tragedy that pervades "Drumhead." In the end, he tells Worf that vigilance is the cost of freedom, and it's easy to see that cost etched into every line on his face.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- Nice that the explanation for the "drumhead" of the title was so low-key. (It's a form of military trial where accusation was essentially the same as proof.)
- I wish Picard would've asked Satie if she were a bell, would she be ringing?
- Hey, that red-headed ensign Riker was eying in "Data's Day" is back! I missed her.
- The ending of this seems very familiar to me. (Picard pushes Satie until she snaps, and then everyone abandons her in the "courtroom.") There's a similar scene near the end of *12 Angry Men*, but I think I've seen it elsewhere, as well. Maybe *Inherit The Wind*?

Next week: Lwaxana Troi returns for "Half a Life," and *TNG* backs down in the face of controversy with "The Host." (At least it does if I'm thinking of the right episode.)

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Half A Life"/"The Host"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[1/27/11 10:00AM](#)

"Half a Life"

Or The One Where There Really Are Death Panels

Hey, it's a Lwaxana Troi episode. No, wait, come back! This one's pretty good.

Perhaps it's the human need to find connections even when none present themselves, but I've noticed lately that a lot of the double features I've been doing share thematic elements and not just the sort of elements that are common to the series as a whole. Like this week, "Half a Life" and "The Host" both deal with the difficulties of managing encounters with unfamiliar races, but what makes them interesting is the very specific impact they deal with: Namely, what happens when you fall in love with an alien? I don't mean in a *Starman* or a *My Stepmother Is An Alien* kind of way, either. These are aliens with different cultures and different biologies. On the one hand, it's a moving testament to the idea of the soul, that anyone could find and build a connection with a stranger that strange. On the other hand, you kiss a dude with a bumpy forehead, god only knows what diseases you'll wake up with in the morning.

Not that such considerations have ever stopped Lwaxana before. She's a problematic character, an irritant to the regular cast who needs to be hilarious to be at all tolerable but who rarely ever is. I've spent enough time in these reviews griping about how misjudged Troi's mother is, how she's shrill and grating when she should be boisterous, how her agonizing joie de vivre marks her as that most frustrating of all television presences: the comic relief who is neither comic nor relieving. And in a sense, she's not much different here, but it's a mark in "Half a Life"'s favor that Lwaxana's presence is so immediately acknowledged as tiresome. *TNG* episodes always begin with a log entry,

bringing us up to speed on whatever plot elements we need to get the story going; here, all we get is Troi's simple, pained, "My mother is on board." The first scene shows Picard failing to dodge her as he makes his way to the transporter room to greet an important guest. Picard is always at a loss around Lwaxana, and Deanna doesn't do much better, but for once, these reactions are more funny than they are cringe-worthy.

What really makes "Life" work, though, is that Lwaxana spends most of her time on-screen wooing a character who seems uniquely suited to appreciating her, ah, gifts. The *Enterprise* is working with the people of Kaelon II to help find a way to reignite their dying sun. To this end, they've brought a Kaelonian scientist on board who thinks he has a way to solve the problem. Dr. Timicin (David Ogden Stiers) is polite, quiet, and, unsurprisingly, very driven. No one knows much about the Kaelons. We're told their isolationist policies are stringent to the point of xenophobia. But Timicin doesn't appear stand-offish or arrogant. The opposite, really; he's so unassuming at times he threatens to disappear into the sets. Stiers, whose best known from his work as Major Charles Winchester on *M*A*S*H*, is a decent-sized dude, but for most of the episode, he seems to be doing everything within his power to shrink into himself.

Which is maybe why he serves as such an excellent foil for Lwaxana. We've seen people shy away from her, and we've seen ridiculous villains become infatuated with her, but this is the first time we've seen her actually inspire someone in the way she intends to inspire him. (Well, first time when it wasn't a hologram, anyway.) One of the best ways to make a strident personality seem more charming is to offset them by someone who actually appreciates their clowning; while *TNG* has done its best in the past to make Lwaxana work by showing how everyone, deep down, thinks she's swell, Timicin's almost instantaneous awe of her is something new. It makes her seem less ridiculous. I still wouldn't want to spend any time alone with her (honestly, people who try and cheer you up by *insisting* you be cheerful make my teeth hurt), but at least I can believe the relationship between the two of them actually makes sense.

That's important, because for "Life" to work at all, the immediate connection between Lwaxana and Timicin has to be something we can get invested in. *TNG* doesn't have great luck with romantic relationships; the only real successful ones on the show seem to be the ones that aren't really entirely formed, like Troi and Riker's occasional sparring or the so-subdued-it's-practically-subliminal flirtation between Picard and Beverly. So it's a relief that even if Timicin and Lwaxana's courtship is broad and arguably rushed, it at least has a believable core. It's not perfect. Lwaxana's forcefulness is, as always, off-putting. (Just imagine if a guy tried to put these moves on a woman. Actually, you don't have to imagine it, just go watch "Galaxy's Child" again.) But Timicin is so clearly delighted by the attention that Lwaxana soon calms down into something approaching a reasonable person.

Once that happens, it becomes very clear what draws these two together: loneliness. Timicin is at a stage in his life when everything is winding down, when all his energies are committed to saving his world, without any consideration for anything beyond that. (For good reason, we'll soon see.) His wife is dead, his children are grown, and while we don't ever see his home life, it's easy to assume he's spent all his waking hours in the past few years in the lab, working towards the solution that should be the legacy he leaves to his world. Lwaxana is brash and crazy, and while the "quiet guy who gets brought to life by the nutty female" is a rank cliché, there's some truth to it. And on the flip side, well, of course Lwaxana is lonely. She's well past the prime of her life, she throws herself at anyone without the good sense to run the other way, and even her daughter is embarrassed to have her around. The show generally plays her as a free-spirit, so enamored of her self and of existence that she can't be contained, so it helps to remember the other side of all that shrill cheer: knowing that as soon as you stop having such a good time, you realize how many of the good times are behind you.

Of course, this wouldn't be much of an episode if it was just two middle-aged people jumping into bed together, so there's a catch: Kaelon II law dictates that its citizens be put to death once they reach the age of sixty. And guess

who's just a few days shy of a birthday? One of the things that makes *TNG* such a distinctive show is its commitment to respecting the cultures it creates, and this one is no exception; Timicin explains the reasoning behind the law with enough dignity and compassion that it almost makes sense. It's essentially a way of fighting the humiliating effects of mortality on the individual and on society at large. Instead of the elderly being abandoned to die alone in "deathwatch facilities" (which sounds just a tad more ominous than "nursing home"), their faculties gone, their time of influence and vitality long behind them, the dead-at-60 law means that folks shuffle off the mortal coil surrounded by family and friends. It's called "The Resolution," and Timicin almost makes it sound noble.

Well, no, not really. Lwaxana objects stridently to the idea, and while her motives are fairly selfish (she's mostly upset that Timicin is being taken away from her), it's hard not to side with her when she points out that Kaelon II didn't really find a solution to the problem of age; they just found a way to avoid the problem. For the most part, Picard and the rest of the crew stay out of the argument. It's not till Timicin starts to have second thoughts that the captain gets involved. The doctor's attempts to rejuvenate the star fail, and Lwaxana is fairly persuasive, so Timicin gets it into his head that hey, maybe he *doesn't* want a lethal injection, or however Kaelon bumps off its golden oldies. (I have my fingers crossed for tiger pit w/optional ninjas.) The government of Kaelon doesn't look to highly on his decision, so out come the warships.

Again, though, Picard doesn't really do anything here. If Timicin wants to stay on the *Enterprise*, Picard is prepared to make that possible. We've had episodes where our heroes had to decide just how much they could interfere with a local culture without violating the Prime Directive; this is not one of those episodes. Timicin's decision becomes increasingly difficult to stand by. The people on the planet below have shut him out, refusing to acknowledge his attempts at solving the problem of the failed tests. The only person who'll talk to him is his daughter, who visits the ship to tell him how embarrassed she is of him. (Hey, it's Michelle Forbes! Who does fine here, given the script she has to work with, except her hair-do is ridiculous.) He could probably escape with the *Enterprise* if he really wanted to and spend the rest of his days with Lwaxana, but to what end? Even if we assume that time spent with Lwaxana would be time spent well, he'd still be abandoning everything he'd ever known and loved.

It's a tricky moral problem, and one that I'm not entirely convinced "Life" pulls off. No matter how convincing Timicin's arguments in favor of the Resolution are, they become irrelevant once he decides he maybe doesn't want to die; the strongly negative reaction from the government and from his daughter are impossible to sympathize with, because their arguments make no real sense. Partly this is a cultural thing, and the episode is laudable for trying to honestly depict a people who sincerely believe that enforced euthanasia is noble. But it becomes too easy to hate them by the end. A daughter who is angry at her dad for not getting murdered like he's supposed to isn't a sympathetic character, even if she doesn't much care for Lwaxana. (At least the idiots in *Logan's Run* have the lie of "renewal" to believe in. Here, all we get is "peace" and the daughter's obsession with being buried next to Dad.)

Of course, the episode doesn't need us to believe Timicin makes a good choice in the end; we only need to believe he made the only choice he could make. There are some powerful moments in "Life," and it's pleasant for once to see Lwaxana adding, rather than subtracting, from a storyline. Her decision in the end to accompany Timicin to his suicide makes her legitimately honorable, and while that doesn't make up for all the tepid theatrics we've had to endure in the past, it at least shows that she's not a complete loss as a character. "Life"'s major flaw is that it pushes too hard to force Timicin into an untenable position, and in doing so, it turns some of its supporting players into villainous caricatures. But the episode largely redeems itself by staying true to its main point: No matter how much time you have left, it's never enough.

Grade: B+

Stray observations:

- Really, one of the reasons Lwaxana works so well here is that her edges aren't sanded down; she's still a self-centered ninny. It's just that she's a ninny who's also well-aware of her own short-comings, which makes her easier to like.
- Line That Would Sound Much Different Coming From Lex Luthor: "Alive, I am a greater threat to my world than a dying sun."

"The Host"

Or The One Where Beverly Gets Her Groove Back But Then Loses It Because This Isn't College Anymore And She's No Longer Comfortable Experimenting

So I guess Beverly decided to stop waiting for Picard, because the very first shot of this episode (after we establish that, yes, the *Enterprise* still exists) is her playing tongue tag with some bumpy forehead dude in a turbolift. How very gauche. Then Data interrupts Beverly and her handsome stranger, aka Ambassador Odan, who fits the "calm, taller" type that Beverly and Deanna both seem so fond of, and there's some mild comedy as Odan and Beverly try and find some way to keep Data from invading their together time. Really, having that android around is like having a 5-year-old on the ship. Somebody should really sit him down and explain the facts of life to him. Or at least the verbal cues that indicate he's being intrusive, since I'm pretty sure Tasha already helped him out with the whole birds and bees back in season one.

Like "Half a Life," "The Host" is about the challenges of interspecies courtship, and both episodes don't quite live up to the ambition of their premises. (Premisi? Man, I so wish that was a real word.) "Life" fumbles in its attempts to turn a philosophical dilemma into a real world one, while "Host" can't really make the romance at its core sing. The story requires Beverly to be so passionately invested in Odan that she's ultimately willing to follow him across bodies (though not genders), but it mostly seems like a passionate affair because we're *told* it's a passionate affair. Beverly goes through the expected motions of a tightly-wound woman in love, and I suppose Odan is charming enough, but the actual relationship that drives the episode is bland as every other affair on the show. Lots of throbbing music and intense close-ups, but not much in the way of actual believable emotion.

And yet, I can't really hold that too much against "The Host," because the idea here is so clever and fascinating that I don't mind it not entirely living up to what it might have been. This is just not a series that can really handle romance, for whatever reason, and really, "Host" doesn't need Odan and Beverly's love to be all that profound in order to work. This is more a problem of relationships than it is anything about specific characters. Like, remember *Indecent Proposal*? Yeah, the movie where Robert Redford turned Woody Harrelson into a pimp and Demi Moore into a, ahem, lady of the evening. It was a ridiculous movie, all slick visuals with no real soul or character, but the concept was so intriguing that it didn't *need* to be good to be successful. Everyone was just so fascinated by the moral question at the heart of the story that everything else was just gravy. Stupid, stupid gravy.

Thankfully "The Host" is quite a bit more successful, character-wise. Beverly is still Beverly, and while Odan is a little too wish-fulfillment perfect to be memorable, the actor playing him exits the episode at roughly the 10-minute mark, so that's not a huge problem. (Yes, once the symbiant is moved into Riker, Jonathan Frakes is basically playing Odan, but we still see him as Riker, with all the baggage that carries.) The actual model for the symbiant is effectively cool/gross enough looking to sell the point, and the conflict which tightens the screws on the relationship, while being yet another in a long line of "aliens who squabble" plots, is solid enough. Maybe I'm just seduced by the tech details. (There are moons and stuff!) But in a way, none of this really matters. Beverly's personality isn't really that important; apart from a brief mention of Wesley at the start of the episode, she's more here to be a stand in for the audience than because of who she is. Of course, her job as the ship's doctor is relevant, given Odan's specific

health requirements, but... well, as with Geordi in "Identity Crisis," while it's hard to imagine anyone else pulling the duty Bev does here, this is more something that happens to her, than something she instigates.

Which brings us back to the *Indecent Proposal* angle. Nobody's offering anybody money to sleep with the good doctor (although just imagining the expression on Picard's face if somebody made the offer is enough to get me through a lot of bad mornings), but we are presented with the sort of philosophical problem that's fascinating to contemplate in the abstract. Odan is a Trill, which means that oh-so-attractively non-threatening body he's wearing at the start of the episode isn't really "him" at all, but a host that the real Odan wears until its no longer viable. The real Odan is a freaky purple and brown thing that looks like a cross between a slug and a bigger, freakier slug, and it/he/whatever has been jumping from host to host for a long time now. This isn't a negative process; the creature isn't leaching off of anyone or taking over bodies without permission. If that were the case, it would be much easier to dismiss. Instead, we simply have a different form of life than what we're accustomed to, and when Odan's host body is killed in a shuttle attack, Beverly is forced to come face to, er, *something* with her form-jumping suitor.

This raises some interesting questions about the nature of love, about what it is that pulls us to someone. Is it purely physical? Purely spiritual? Or is it some combination of the two that makes it difficult to accept a new face and a new body, even if the personality is unchanged. I rather think that last is true, and it's not hard at all to sympathize with Beverly's distress here. "Host" is a tad melodramatic, of course. Beverly's only known Odan two weeks when he "dies," and the amount of angst she goes through on realizing his true nature is a little much at times, even if it is entirely understandable. We need strong pressures to drive her back into the new Odan's arms, but this could've been underplayed a bit more to help balance out the strangeness of the situation. Beverly comes off as weirdly unstable, as though her lack of romance has made her nearly as lonely as poor Lwaxana. It's not that she wouldn't be upset, or troubled, or confused, but... well, it was two weeks. Falling like crazy for someone in two weeks happens all the time, but if something interrupts the fall, it's usually not *that* difficult to walk away.

Odan doesn't really make a great case for himself, either. While Beverly's freaking out, he spends too much time acting baffled as to why she'd be uncomfortable around him. Like just about every lover on this show (seriously, do people in the future ever just meet and decide, "Hey, let's hang out again some time"? Is it *always* a case of one side or the other forcing their attentions?), Odan seems to have difficulty understanding the concept of "personal space," just barely managing to restrain himself from grabbing Beverly in his arms post-transformation and forcing her to see reason via lip assault. She does eventually succumb, at least in part because after Odan's original host dies, Riker volunteers to temporarily support the Trill until a new host can arrive. While there's never been any implication on the show that Bev is into Riker (or the reverse, although seeing as how this is Riker, I doubt he hasn't considered it), he's at least a familiar face and someone she trusts. Admittedly, the fact that she knows Riker so well makes the alienness of Odan's condition even more apparent, but there's a friendship there already. Only I think the host bodies experience/remember everything that happens to them, so there was probably some awkward eye contact after Odan left.

As always with new races on *TNG*, I can't help wondering at just how the Trill society works. Are the host bodies from another species? Why would someone willingly give up control of themselves to another creature? And how is it that nobody at Starfleet has any idea how any of this works? None of this really stretches credibility, and I appreciate that it isn't over-explained, but given that, so far as we can tell, Odan's control over the body he inhabits is a dictatorship rather than a democracy, it's the sort of connection that could use a little more justification. (Since the Trill don't exactly disappear from the *Trek* franchise after this episode, I imagine we'll get more explanation down the road.) Really, though, the details aren't the important part here, as much as I enjoy them. The important bit is trying to decide if you could love someone even if they stopped looking like themselves.

Beverly decides she can, but only to a certain point. I made the joke last week that "The Host" compromises at the end in the face of potential controversy, but I did the episode a disservice. After a long struggle to keep Riker alive long enough for Odan to get his job done, Odan's new host body arrives, and it's female. While this She-Odan still has the same feelings for Bev that Riker-Odan did, Beverly isn't able to make the gender jump and sadly ends their relationship in the episode's final scene. This makes perfect sense. We like to pretend that love is a wholly spiritual thing, but that does the sensation a disservice; we fall in love with features, with shapes, with bodies, as well as with minds. And, more crucially, when we fall in love, we admit that we're willing to sacrifice a piece of ourselves in order to get closer to someone else. But everyone has a line, and if you love them, you won't ask them to cross it.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- "Listening with skill seems to have evaporated with the heat of argument." President Obama should totally have quoted this in his State of the Union speech.
- Beverly turns to Troi for comfort in her distress, and Troi, well, she tells Beverly to go get with Odan in Riker form, because Troi's in love with her dead father? Or something. A very odd scene. It's supposed to be about the importance of love and so forth, but it really just plays as poor Troi having some serious Daddy issues.
- Odan's behavior post-body swap is fairly hideous, although I think we're supposed to take it as "forceful" or "romantic." You didn't tell a woman you love that you were really a sentient slug body-jumping its way through life, dude. You can't pretend that *she's* the unreasonable one here.

Next week: We check out "The Mind's Eye" and "In Theory."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Mind's Eye"/"In Theory"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[2/03/11 10:00AM](#)

"The Mind's Eye"

Or The One Where Reading Rainbow Gets His Wires Crossed

You gotta love the blind spots of the *TNG* writing team. On the one hand, there's the holodeck, perhaps the most perfectly insane entertainment device ever created for a science fiction show; it can give you anything, simulate anything, and make you part of a story, and if you're really lucky, it can even generate a powerful artificial intelligence seemingly at random. I'm not sure it's the ultimate gaming experience (I think most of us enjoy sitting on our asses for extended periods of time too much—"perfect realism" in games is an overrated concept), but it does indicate a logical endpoint in the development process. It's a stunning achievement in design, programming, and execution.

And on the other hand, we have Geordi, sitting alone in a shuttlecraft for however many hours, listening to calypso music and playing trivia games against the computer. Awful trivia games, I might add. "The Mind's Eye" aired in May of 1991. The Game Boy had been around for 2 years; books for... quite a few centuries more than that. Surely, one of the writers on staff had had ample opportunity to pick up one or both.

Still, that cold open had a great "travel always kind of sucks" feel to it, as Geordi's stuck in, essentially, a small box, trying to make the best of it the only way he knows how: by being a huge freaking dork. And then a Romulan ship decloaks right off the starboard bow, and Geordi just about craps his pants. Because hey, who wouldn't.

"Eye" is a rock solid *TNG* episode, playing off of continuity for long-term fans (like us!) and, regardless of how well you know the backstory, delivering a solid, exciting, and sharp thriller. Last week's episodes were all about ambition,

exploring high concepts which paid off more through ambition than actual execution. "Eye" is still ambitious, but the hooks here (brainwashing, political intrigue, betrayal) aren't quite so mind-bending. Well, okay, apart from the literal mind-bending part. What I'm getting at is that this episode isn't trying to challenge how you look at the world or make you rethink your views on sexuality and emotional attachments. It's just trying to kick some ass, and it does that very, very well.

For starters, Geordi gets tortured! In that he gets these crazy implants stuck in his VISOR equipment that put him under the control of some very not nice people. Ah, Romulans. Is there any evil they won't sink to? It's all part of a plot to upset Federation/Klingon relations; rebels on the Klingon colony of Krios are fighting for resistance, and the Governor of Krios, Vagh, is accusing the Federation of working with the rebels. This would be bad news for everyone, except, of course, the Romulans and those Klingons who kind of wish everything could go back to the way it was, with all the villainy and the gloating and the killing humans. The Romulans have been providing the rebels with Federation phaser rifles, but Geordi and Data are able to prove easily enough that those rifles didn't actually come from Starfleet. That's okay, though. The bad guys have other tricks up Geordi's sleeve.

It's impressive how much "Eye" manages to pack into a single hour, without ever feeling particularly rushed. We've got Geordi's time aboard the Romulan ship and his "training," we've got the political situation with the Klingons, which means a few references to Worf's disgrace, and we've got Geordi's attempts to solve a mystery that he himself is responsible for, even if he isn't aware of it. All of this fits together quite well, and there's no confusion here or convoluted plotting that I noticed. One of the benefits of *TNG*'s somewhat casual approach to continuity is that, when the show does make references to its past, it rarely seems forced or unnecessary. There's no "This is just like that time we fought that nest of Gundarks" moment here. Ambassador Kell references Worf's disgrace as a potential cause of discord in dealing with Governor Vagh, and Vagh references Picard's reputation among Klingons. Both these moments might pass under the radar of someone new to the show, but for those who catch them, it creates a sense of a greater story behind the story we're watching. We have to fill in most of the gaps ourselves, but it helps the illusion that all this time we've been watching Beverly hook up with space slugs, the Klingon Empire has been on the verge of collapse. That's efficiency right there, and that kind of smart writing (Rene Echevarria is credited with the teleplay) pervades the episode.

For example, we only get a couple of scenes showing us how the Romulans break Geordi's mind down, but those scenes are enough to convince us that he's a threat once he's back on the *Enterprise*. First, they explain how his VISOR makes him especially vulnerable to cortical implants, since the pre-existing tech can largely hide any new equipment. So Geordi gets hooked up to a freaky looking machine, and we're reminded how painful those white-eye contact lenses must be when they remove the VISOR. Second, we got a *Manchurian Candidate* style sequence in which the Romulans recreate Ten Forward on a holodeck and order Geordi to kill Chief O'Brien. Which he eventually does. We get some murky shots from Geordi's POV (the first we've seen of what the world looks like to him in a few seasons), and Geordi's casual "Can I sit with you guys" post-murder is appropriately chilling, but I think my favorite part of this scene doesn't happen till later in the episode. Once he's returned to active duty, Geordi seems largely okay, but then he wanders into the real Ten Forward, sees O'Brien sitting alone, and dumps his drink on the guy's shoulder. It's an appropriately weird moment, and it ties in nicely with Geordi's agonized conversation with Troi at the episode's end. While the Romulans are ultimately thwarted by Data and Picard, their plan nearly works, and it's impossible to know just how much damage they did to the Chief Engineer's brain.

There's also the nice touch of having Geordi put in charge of investigating his own crimes (his ultimate assignment is to assassinate Governor Vagh, but before he does that, he beams some weapons down to Krios to pin more blame on the Federation). As he has no idea that his mind has been tampered with, he investigates to the best of his abilities, and there's something darkly funny in the way he keeps casually mentioning himself as one of the few people who could've been responsible for what happened and how no one suspects him until it's nearly too late. The

only real reason the Romulans' scheme doesn't work is that Data and Riker happen to notice some strange transmissions on an unusual frequency. Data investigates, and the episode climaxes with him looking over the shuttle Geordi was abducted from, while Geordi goes to take out Vagh. We know Data will figure out the danger before it's too late, just as we know something will prevent Geordi from committing murder, but it's to the episode's credit that this knowledge doesn't hinder the suspense. It's also nice that we don't get the "But Geordi, it's me, Data!" scene that seems par for the course for brainwashing storylines. Nobody talks Geordi out of firing the phaser; he's been programmed to do a job, and if not for Picard's quick reflexes, he would accomplished his objective.

For all its soppy nobility and utopian ideals, *TNG* can often be surprisingly stark in its conclusions. Here, it's the knowledge that part of what makes Geordi unique also makes him vulnerable and that even after the Romulan's efforts to control him have been detected, he's still left to struggle with memories (including a girlfriend named "Jonic") he can't believe are fake. There's also the fate of Ambassador Kell; once his treachery is revealed (he's been working with the Romulans and was Geordi's handler on the *Enterprise*), the ambassador requests asylum. Picard says sure—once he's cleared his name of all charges. So basically, our captain sentences the bastard to brutal torture and execution at the hands of the people he betrayed. It's a long shot from the darkest the show has ever been, but it is good to remember that here, just like everywhere else, if you come at the King, you best not miss.

Grade: A

Stray Observation:

- All right, so that *Wire* quote was a little forced.
- There's a Romulan commander who stays cloaked in shadow during Geordi's kidnapping. She only has a couple of lines, but her voice sounds familiar. I wonder...
- I really hate that Geordi's headpiece is called "VISOR." It makes me think he belongs on a Saturday morning cartoon, fighting the forces of M.E.A.N. or something.
- I like that the Romulans gave Geordi a make-believe girlfriend. It's just that added touch of cruelty that makes them absolute dicks.

"In Theory"

Or The One Where Data Dates

"In Theory" is difficult to watch in spots. There are cringe-worthy moments aplenty here, from Data's love interest's attempts to flirt with a machine, to Data's attempts to respond to that flirtation in an appropriate manner. The episode's B-plot, which has the *Enterprise* trapped in a field of reality-distorting clouds, isn't anywhere near as odd, but it's also not particularly compelling, either. It doesn't tie into Data's storyline at all, and it ends with Picard piloting the ship to safety, which, while undeniably cool, is something we've seen before. As such, this is another episode that raises a lot of fascinating questions but doesn't quite have the knack of giving us enough answers to be satisfying or even completely realizing the complexity of the issues it raises. But while I didn't exactly love it, I'm happy it exists. I took some flack months ago when I said *TNG* was a good, not great, series. I'm not sure if I still stand by that; I am sure such a statement is largely irrelevant in the context of these discussions, since it doesn't really change my appreciation or my critical opinion of individual episodes. I do think, though, that if you wanted to make a case for this as a great series (and really, that's a case that could be very well made), a flawed, intermittently ridiculous episode such as this one would belong as much in your argument as undeniable classics like "Yesterday's Enterprise." "Theory" doesn't entirely work, but the fact that it was made at all, that this is a show that's willing to devote over half an episode to whether or not a robot can love and not give us a happy ending, is laudable.

Romantic relationships are strange, often uncomfortable, occasionally transcendent, and incredibly difficult to capture in fiction, because fiction, no matter how well-realized, tends to simplify human interactions. When we watch characters on a show, we know something of their history, and we can see actors reacting to each other and draw conclusions, but there are limits to our knowledge. So we draw certain conclusions. If two people seem to fit well together, if they have a certain level of chemistry, well, they should be a happy couple. If they're both good people, why wouldn't it work? We reduce emotional exchanges to algebraic equations, on the pretense that there's a cause and effect in matters of the heart that should be recognizable to everyone. But that's not really how it works. The difference between liking someone and loving them is incalculable, and it rarely makes practical sense. It's one of the few opportunities we mortals have to witness the sublime, as no matter how much we try to break ourselves down to a series of psychological stimuli/responses, we'll always miss that moment, that infinitesimal shift, that binds us to another. Dating sites will provide us with questionnaires establishing our type, and they'll have a certain degree of statistical success, but there's no precise calculation that can fathom the workings of the heart. Or, rather, the neuro-chemical reactions in our brain which we label as "heart."

Which is both profound and mundane in practice, I think, and most fiction tends to focus on the former, while inadvertently heightening the latter. "Theory" isn't really an exception, as *TNG* has never been a show that does relationships very well. What makes this work better than, say, the overheated goofiness of "The Host," is that we really aren't interested in an actual love affair here. We're more interested in how Data attempts to mimic what a love affair should be, and what he learns—or fails to learn—in the process. We've never seen Lt. Jenna D'Sora before now, and we won't see her again. She's not all that interesting in her own right, which is one of reasons "Theory" doesn't work quite as well as it should. We have no rooting investment in seeing her and Data make anything work; it's mostly just curiosity as to how it will fail, which is fun as far as it goes but takes some of the sting of an otherwise excellent final scene.

And really, a lot of the interaction between Data and Jenna doesn't flow like it should. There's no compelling reason given as to why Jenna suddenly gets into her head to make a play for Data, beyond the fact that she's just gotten out of a relationship, and Data is a very nice guy. That makes sense as far as it goes, but Data is such an oddity, and his oddness is so constantly and clearly on display, that you'd think there'd have to be something else to drive Jenna to act, some oddity about her personality that we never get to see. Yes, Data is relentless kind, helpful, and supportive. But... well, either she's a techno-fetishist, or she's been through so many abusive relationships that she desperately needs someone she can trust. Either of those would've made more sense than the sort of, "Eh, well, I guess it's a rebound thing" that we get here. Admittedly, both those options are dark enough that I'm not sure the show could've pulled them off, but I'm not sure I buy that anyone would so casually embark on a romantic relationship with a machine.

But then, it is the future after all, and we've seen our fair share of inter-species hook-ups before. Data doesn't *look* like a machine, exactly, and the impression we've gotten of dating on the *Enterprise* is pretty much "have at." So in that sense, the casualness of Jenna's initial decision makes a certain sense. It just doesn't speak very well for her as a character, because we're never given a sense that she's thought any of this through. Data does; before making his decision, he consults all his friends on the ship, which is as entertaining as these consultations nearly always are. Geordi: "No idea." Troi: "I advise caution." Worf: "Klingons fight for what they want! But if you hurt her, I'll kill you." Riker: "Go for it, dude. And if she decides to swing, let me know." Picard: "Eh, I have a spaceship to run."

So Data takes the plunge, and we get a handful of one-on-one scenes which are very, very odd. Data's literalism makes things difficult, as always (although his continued inability to grasp popular idiom is a grating and ill-considered as ever), and Jenna seems to realize almost at once that she's gotten herself in over her head. But they press forward. Data devises a program to engage with his girlfriend in the appropriate fashion, which means that we

get to see Brent Spiner's smarm on full display; much like the bizarrely exaggerated gestures he makes towards physical intimacy, his efforts at flirting or warmth are too obviously false. There are plenty of people perfectly capable of faking emotion convincingly, and while I think the conclusion "Theory" arrives at, that Data just isn't ready to date (or else Jenna just isn't an appropriate match), is a good one, it would've made more sense if the two had, at least temporarily, made it work. It's pretty easy to ignore the rough patches in the early phases of a relationship, even if only one half of the match is really feeling it.

There's also the show's unsurprisingly asexual approach to the two's courtship. We don't need to return to Data's "fully functional" days, but much of this episode plays like a couple of elementary school kids playing at dating, as opposed to two supposed adults. We don't see any of their dates, and apart from a couple of chaste smooches, there's no indication that anybody's getting past the hand-holding stage. This makes a certain amount of sense for Data, seeing as how (apart from <shudder> Tasha) he doesn't get out much, but Jenna has supposedly been in adult relationships before. If everyone is so egalitarian about sex in the future, why wouldn't they hook up? Data is, in a sense, the greatest sex toy ever created. Even if she didn't intend to spend the rest of her life with him, you'd think Jenna would've at least poked around a bit to see which buttons did what.

Really, though, all this silliness is largely redeemed by the end of the episode. Jenna realizes what all of us have known the whole time: Neat as Data is, she can't inspire in him the same passion he inspires in her. There's no risk of him ever breaking her heart, but one of the things they don't tell you about love is, you have to have that risk. That's what makes it special; each moment you're with someone, you have to believe that even though they could betray you, they won't. With Data, there's no danger, so there's no reward. She leaves, somewhat upset, and Data sits in his apartment, staring at the door. His cat rubs his leg, and Data picks Spot up and pets him. His eyes never leave the door. You don't know if he's processing what just happened, if he's trying to understand it, if in some dim way he was hurt by the loss. Or maybe he's just staring at the door because there's no good reason not to. It's the sort of eerie moment that happens in all of the good Data-centric episodes, that moment when you expect to see the curtain pulled back, and the man behind the mechanical wizard who's really pulling the strings. Instead, it's just Data. Staring at a door.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- Didn't really talk about the B-plot here, but, well, there wasn't much to talk about. An interesting hook, but it doesn't go anywhere.
- Gosh, women are just super crazy, y'know?
- "It's my ship, Will. I've got to do this." Um, why? And what? And look, was Picard off having his own subplot while all this crazy relationship stuff was going on? Like, maybe he had a crisis of confidence because he was getting older, and all those weird poltergeist-activities were making him fear he might be going senile, and now he needs to risk his life and the lives of everyone on board the ship to prove he still has it. Because if that was happening, show, it would've been nice if you'd let us in on it.

Next week: We finish up the fourth season with "Redemption," and jump right into the fifth season with "Redemption II."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Redemption: Part 1"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[2/10/11 10:00AM](#)

"Redemption: Part 1"

Or The One Where Worf Holds A Knife By The Wrong End

TASHA YAR IS ALIVE, AND SHE IS A ROMULAN!

Well, sort of. Hold on, let me back up a bit.

There's a lot to recommend season four. The ensemble, which finally clicked together in season three, has settled into a warm, easy rhythm; the quality of the writing still matters, and the performances aren't always as solid as they could be, but there's a sense of solidity to the show now that helps it coast over the rough spots. I can take all the cheap shots I want at Troi, I can—and will—continue to criticize the show's clumsiness in handling its female characters. I can take issue over the show's inability to handle romance, or its often leaden attempts at humor. But while these problems frustrate me, they don't significantly diminish my overall appreciation of the show. That sense of community makes me look forward to each episode, and it means there's always something to fall back on. It feels *solid* now, which is something I think only television shows can achieve—books or movies have to make their case and go, but a series can settle in for the long haul, its best moments slowly building into a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Just as important, season four raised the stakes with inter-episode continuity, most notably in Picard and Worf's relationship with the Klingon Empire. Only a handful of episodes dealt with this situation directly, but that's enough to give the impression that some great galactic struggle for power was happening just beyond the sightlines of even mediocre outings like "Galaxy's Child." Every time a Klingon would bop onto screen, we'd hear the situation back

home had gotten just a little worse, and every time someone sneered at Worf for his "disgrace," we were reminded of an injustice waiting to be resolved. I've talked about the importance of this kind of connectivity before, and I don't want to over-stress it; most genre shows these days, even the outright procedurals, stress that sense of time passing more than *TNG* ever did. (Picard commenting that it's been a year since "Sins of the Father" was somewhat surprising, although I guess if I'd been paying attention to the stardates at the beginning of most episodes, I would've figured that out for myself?) But while the threat of a Klingon/Romulan alliance is nowhere near as elementally disturbing as the Borg, there's a reason that "Best of Both Worlds" and "Redemption" make strong season finales. These are dangers we knew were coming.

I'd initially planned to do both parts of "Redemption" this week, but I didn't plan my Netflix shipments properly, so we're going to stick with the finale. As for my thoughts on the rest of season four, well, like I said, I'd recommend it. But I do think it's overall weaker than season three. Season four doesn't have quite the same heights, strong as it is; it can't compete with "Yesterday's Enterprise" and "Who Watches The Watchers," among others (I was surprised at how many outright classics come from season three), and the second part of "Best of Both Worlds" can't quite live up to the shocks of the first. But season four is impressive in the way the writers continued to push the boundaries of their core concepts, even if those experiments weren't entirely successful. "Family" is remarkable, eschewing the show's traditional adherence to science fiction in favor of giving the depth of Picard's injuries their full due, and "The Wounded" introduced us to another militarily aggressive race in the Cardassians, a potential threat that won't really pay off for a few more years. I think my biggest complaint is that there's no real stand-out sci-fi story here, no "The Survivors"-style storytelling to take full advantage of the series ability to throw out the occasional anthology-style mindbender. But I appreciate the more focused attempts at universe-building.

Which brings us to "Redemption," which apart from a misstep or two, is a collection of some truly satisfying badassery, finally giving Worf the screentime he deserves and bringing to a head the rumblings we've been hearing since Picard stepped in to help the Klingons choose a new leader in "Reunion." Gowron, the heir apparent to the Klingon throne, is getting ready to take power, and Picard is required for the ceremony. Unsurprisingly, Gowron's ascension is not without its dangers. A rebel faction of Klingons, led by Duras' (the guy who framed Worf's father for the treason his own father committed, before murdering Worf's lover; my only regret is that Worf couldn't kill him more than once) delightfully wicked sisters, Lursa and B'Etor, are working with the Romulans to grab power for themselves. Their secret weapon: Toral, a whiny wretch who happens to be Duras' son. They bring him out right when Gowron should be taking his rightful place as leader, and when Picard eventually rejects their claims (explaining that regardless of his ancestry, Toral is basically a nobody who ain't killed anybody), the sisters take those factions of the Empire loyal with them to wage war against Gowron and his people.

During all of this, Worf has finally decided to make his move (after some urging from Picard which the captain may have reason to regret later). He convinces Kurn to help him support Gowron's claim, on the promise that Gowron will clear their family name. It's a sharp, aggressive move, and it's very, very exciting to see Worf finally being proactive. The character has generally been relegated throughout the series to jokes (which are, admittedly, generally hilarious) and used as sort of a litmus test for potential threats, but here, he finally gets a chance to actually do something, and the results are electric. He wins Kurn to his side and then saves Gowron's ass during the big space battle at the episode's climax. Gowron finally grants him his honor in the end, and it's impressive how powerful the moment is. *TNG* isn't really a show that does epic well. We're told repeatedly that the Empire is at stake here, but it often just feels like a really aggressive family spat. And yet it's clear something important is going on.

Picard isn't as much a factor in "Redemption" as he has been in the past, which is for the best. Stewart is such a commanding presence that it's necessary for him to be sidelined if we need to start paying attention to other people. Which isn't to say the captain isn't involved at all. He spends most of the episode negotiating the increasingly complicated political waters of the Federation's relationship with the Klingon Empire. He wants to help, but he can't

bring the full weight of the *Enterprise* to aid Gowron, because direct official interference would change the nature of the situation in unpredictable ways. Especially with the Romulans on the prowl. There's a great scene when Picard goes to meet with Duras' sisters, and basically lays on the line that he knows exactly what's going on, and he'll do his best to stop them, although he can't do everything he might. (One of the sisters attempts to seduce him, I think, which is odd. Does this approach often work with humans?)

It's a tad rushed, but everything eventually builds to Worf resigning his position in Starfleet to stand by Gowron's side. Which is maybe a little abrupt and yet it makes sense; Worf's clearly been itching for a chance to get back to his ancestral world, and he's finally at a point where it seems that the Klingons need him more than the *Enterprise* does. There's something very fitting about seeing Worf in full regalia, as though that metal sash he's been wearing all these years finally decided to stop screwing around. Admittedly, I know this change is temporary, because I know Worf eventually comes back to Starfleet. But this shift is a lot more long-term plausible than Picard's Borg-ification. It serves as a logical conclusion to Worf's story on the show; in fact, I'm curious as to how well the second part of the story will justify his return, because this makes almost too much sense. Whatever happens in part two, the big send off on the *Enterprise* was well-handled, and I'll give them credit for at least pretending his resignation means something, even if he ultimately comes back.

As for the missteps, well, I'm getting tired of Guinan doing Troi's job all the time. Her scene with Worf is cute (hey, remember how Worf has a son?), but it would've made more sense to see Worf talking with someone on the ship we know he's close to, like Riker. Guinan is basically just a means for the writers to hand out some moral lessons to their characters without actually stepping in and doing it themselves. The character should be more interesting than she is, given her history with Picard and her mysterious past. But here, she's just on hand to push Worf in the direction the story needs him to go.

And then there's the final big cliffhanger reveal: TASHA YAR IS ALIVE AND SHE IS A ROMULAN. Sort of. Well, it'd Denise Crosby, anyway, so I'm assuming she's playing some clone of Tasha's. We don't get any explanation here, but given how she was hidden in shadow during "The Mind's Eye" and for most of this episode, it's obvious her casting is supposed to be important. I'm not sure what to think about that. Right now, it feels like a stunt; Tasha got her necessary exist in "Yesterday's Enterprise," and that was as perfect as it needed to be. Besides, Crosby is still a bland performer, so I'm not hugely convinced she'll make an appropriately menacing villain. And yet, I got chills seeing her. So we'll see. "Redemption" isn't quite in the same league as "Best of Both Worlds," but it's an appropriate enough conclusion to the fourth season, full of bold choices and complicated emotions and far more adept at raising questions than it is at answering them.

Stray observations:

- I'm over halfway done with the show. It's an odd feeling.
- Next week, we dive into season five with "Redemption, Part II" and "Darmok."

SEASON FIVE

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Redemption: Part Two"/"Darmok"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[2/17/11 10:00AM](#)

"Redemption, Part II"

Or The One Where Tasha Yar Gets Screwed Again

Well, that was a bit of a let down.

To be fair, season premieres on *TNG* have always been hit or miss. "Encounter at Farpoint" was one of the stronger episodes of the first season, but that's due as much to novelty and the general suckage of the rest of the season, as much as it is the quality of the episode itself. "The Child" was flat out terrible, the sort of awkward cul-de-sac that's probably necessary for a show's development (in a "Yeah, let's never do *that* again" kind of way) but a disappointing, off-putting episode on its own. "Evolution"... wasn't terrible. A bit dry, maybe, but the story was coherent, and Troi wasn't forced to embarrass herself any more than usual. "Best of Both Worlds, Part II," while not as strong as the first part, was still a fine way to open the fourth season, however, and given that "Redemption, Part I," seems to be following the same pattern—strong opening, big changes, bit of a cliffhanger ending—well, it wasn't unreasonable to expect that "Redemption, Part II" would keep the streak alive.

It doesn't, though; it's not terrible, but there are some frustrating missteps here, and Worf, who should've been the centerpiece of the storyline, spends too much of his time as a frustratingly passive bystander. In a way, this makes sense. We need to get Worf back to the *Enterprise*, so he has to have some kind of change of heart. A logical way to do this is to show him being increasingly disenchanted with the way the Klingon Empire does business and how its supposed ideals, when put into practice, turn into a lot of pointless back-stabbing and fighting. And that's basically what we get, except there isn't a whole lot of *Worf* in there. We see him struggling to make his brother see reason, then getting kicked around a bit (sigh); the Duras sisters kidnap him and try and win him over to their cause. He

refuses, and then, when Gowron finally solidifies power, Worf refuses to execute Toral, the Duras heir. Then he asks Picard if he can return to duty on the *Enterprise*, and Picard says sure. All the pieces are there, but it's as though no one working on the episode realized that Worf is really the key part of this story and not some ridiculously convoluted twist involving Tasha Yar's daughter.

Yeah, so about that "bit of a cliffhanger"... "Best of Both Worlds, Part I" has one of the best cliffhangers in the history of genre television. "Redemption, Part I," has a little loved former cast member revealing that—gasp!—she's not dead. I mean, that we character isn't dead. Except the original Tasha Yar is, in fact, dead, and Denise Crosby is actually playing Tasha's half-human, half-Romulan daughter, Sela. Which makes Crosby's presence here even less justifiable, seeing as how most people don't look *exactly* like their parents. I'm getting ahead of myself, though; my first point is that as cliffhangers go, this was lukewarm tea, and not very good tea at that. The reveal was handled in such a way as to make us think something exciting was happening, and it sort of was, but, well, is anyone really missing Yar at this point? Or Crosby? Worf quitting the *Enterprise* to stand by his brother's side, Worf regaining his family honor, Picard seemingly abandoning the Klingon Empire to destroy itself from the inside: These are plot points worth getting excited about. Except none of those really yielded the same level of shock as Riker's "Fire." Sela doesn't either, but she *is* a question that has to be answered, and her presence is striking in a way that Worf wearing a Klingon uniform can't quite match.

Still, I should've trusted my gut reaction to her return more, because Crosby is all over "Redemption, Part II," and the more we learn about her, the less we want to know. I had this weird idea that it was all going to come down to some nonsense about cloning; somehow, maybe when Tasha from "Yesterday's Enterprise" traveled back in time, the Romulans got a sample of her DNA, and then decided to make a copy. (I also had thought it might turn out that Toral was a clone as well, since it seemed awfully convenient that the sisters would have him on hand just when they needed a legitimate heir to the throne.) This would've been ridiculous, yes—why the hell would anyone want to clone Tasha Yar?—but no more ridiculous than what we got. At least my way, Yar's sacrifice in "Yesterday's" would remain relatively unscathed, a satisfying conclusion to an abbreviated character arc.

Instead, we learn that Tasha survived the initial battle, that she was taken back to Romulus, where she was forced to be the consort to a Romulan official; that she bore his child, and four years later, tried to escape captivity with the toddler in tow (where should escape to is never made clear, but this is Tasha, after all, and long games were never her strong suit); and that the toddler, Sela, realizing what her mother was trying to do, called out, thwarting the escape plan and leading to her mother's execution. On its own, that's a strong back-story. It lets us know straight off that Sela is a troubled, nasty piece of work. Unfortunately, this doesn't exist in isolation, and by trying to merge this character with what we already know about Tasha, Sela's childhood and, let's face it, frankly irrelevant ancestry become pointlessly distracting at best, and insulting to one of the show's strongest episodes at worst. Now, instead of Tasha getting to go out on a high note, fighting for what she believes in alongside someone she loves, she spends four years getting raped, and then she's betrayed by her own child and killed. She was better off getting murdered by the Pudding Skin Monster.

What compounds the frustration here is that there is no reason for any of this. We need a Romulan bad guy for Picard to square off against, sure, but pulling Crosby back on the show doesn't add some new drama to the situation, and it certainly doesn't enhance the conflict which already exists. Instead, we get a few scenes in which everyone on board the *Enterprise* is shocked to see Yar's face again, Picard has a conversation with her about her past, and then... that's it, really. The climax of the episode focuses largely on Data figuring out a way to detect Romulan ships while they're still cloaked, and while Sela is in charge of the fleet, there's no emotional component to her defeat. Two-parters should only happen when you can't possibly fit all the story you need to fit into one episode and when all that story needs to be told in one basic unit. Here, it just seems like they wanted to find a hook for the end of last season and then didn't bother to think how that would really work with the Klingon Civil War.

As for the Civil War, well, it all gets resolved awfully quickly, which is the problem with this kind of tenuous approach to serialization; two episodes isn't really enough to do it justice, but *TNG* isn't designed to devote much more than that. Even under those conditions, though, this feels pretty abrupt. Picard's justification for getting Starfleet involved is sound, and Data gets to kick some righteous ass as the captain of his own ship, which, honestly, is another plotline that really deserved its own episode. We see Data displaying emotion to win the attention and begrudging respect of his First Officer, and while it's clearly a choice he's making based on what he's seen Picard do, it's fascinating to wonder what effect this could have on his development. Plus, it's just nice to see him put yet another dickish officer in his place.

Weirdly, Data's quick-thinking, struggles in the face of prejudice, and final conversation with Picard are the dramatic and emotional high-points of the episode. And that, quite frankly, isn't right. Worf gets precious little to do on *TNG* as it is, and when offered a perfect opportunity to give him the spotlight, "Part II" seems more interested in needlessly re-opening old wounds. Individual scenes are still strong, but they fail to combine to any greater effect, and after the potentially rousing set up of "Redemption, Part I," this is mostly a disappointment.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- My problems with this episode can really be summed up by this exchange between Kurn and Worf: "But it's our way. It's the Klingon way." "I know. But it is not *my* way." *That* is what the episode should've been about.
- I forgot that Guinan comes to see Picard to give him some vague "Yesterday's Enterprise"-related exposition. Now that I've remembered this, I'm going to try and forget it again. They managed to get away with using Guinan's intuition to drive the plot in "Yesterday's." They really shouldn't go back to that well ever again.
- Still, I can't grade this too low, since Picard's "Mr. Data, nicely done" was terrific. Especially the grin on Stewart's face when he said it.

"Darmok"

Or Handlen at the AV Club, Where The Words Flowed

How much you enjoy "Darmok" depends a great deal on what kind of sci-fi fan you are; in fact, it depends on how you approach stories in general. It depends on how far you're willing to go to meet a concept half-way, and how "realistic" you demand that concept to be. Because, yes, we can get all picky and point out that there are all kinds of things on *TNG* that don't really make sense, or are improbable, or bend disbelief. I've had a great deal of fun making fun of the holodeck for this reason, and I still have a hard time taking the replicators entirely seriously. But we can overlook those, because we're in Future Land, and we're willing to accept certain basic concepts. We don't need to know how they work. We see how the society around them functions, and that's enough. Besides, we're traveling the galaxy here in hours and days, not centuries. Unless we accept a little of Arthur C. Clarke's "magic" technology, we're never going to get anywhere.

No matter how much you're willing to swallow, though, the Children of Tama are a stretch. At least, their mode of communication is. It sounds English-y enough, but instead of declarative sentences, we just get a constant stream of references. "Shaka, when the walls fell" and "Darmok at Tanagra" and the always popular "Sokath! His eyes uncovered!" That sort of thing. It's ridiculous when you first hear it, until you piece together what's happening; each phrase (and most are repeated multiple times throughout the episode) represents a specific emotion or circumstance. "Shaka. When the walls fell" means failure or disappointment; "Darmok at Tanagra" is a warrior making a stand;

"Sokath! His eyes uncovered!" indicates someone who finally understands the truth. It's not just random words meant to confuse poor Picard and his crew. It's a different way of thinking, which leads to a different way of communication, which means Picard's usual offers of peace and friendship are going to be a little more complicated to convey.

Now, here's the tricky part. Once you get the core concept of "Darmok," it is very, very easy to dismiss it entirely. Organically, it makes no real sense at all. A language based entirely in metaphor would still need some way of conveying concrete facts; you can't build a starship by saying, "Solo! At the Kessel Run!" And seeing as how the Tamarians clearly have words beyond names, it's hard to understand why they don't start with simple, straightforward exchanges when they're dealing with a new race. Picard spends most of the episode stranded on a planet with the Tamarian captain, Dathon (the inimitable Paul Winfield, who once again learns that the *Star Trek* universe is hazardous to his health), struggling to find some common ground, and the Tamarian language is so absurdly conceived that it often seems like Dathon is being willfully obtuse. This is a plotline that practically begs to be nitpicked and mocked, and the show's target audience, by and large, are people who get a lot of self-worth out of doing just that. It's almost worse than the God-Like-Beings, because at least those, you can wave away any absurdities with "Eh, wizard did it." Here, the episode needs us to believe that the Tamarians are powerful but not omnipotent, and that neither side has complete control over what happens next.

I loved this episode, though, because it's the sort of episode that you have to love to enjoy it at all. If you can get past the improbability of the core concept (all language is, essentially, metaphor, words used as stand-ins for something else, and that the Tamarians would get this, and yet not refine it past the broad concepts we see them expressing here, is bizarre), the episode is carried by terrific performances, particularly Stewart and Winfield, a freaky monster, and a suspenseful climax. Just as importantly, it's carried by that concept, which, absurd or no, actually looks to address one of the most powerful, and unsettling, aspects of communication: Namely, how do you successfully exchange ideas with a different species? How do you find common ground when you come from different worlds? The best way to look at the Tamarian language of metaphor is to view the language as a metaphor itself, for demonstrating in easy to grasp terms how two sides can find understanding nearly impossible, even when both are striving for the same basic goal.

Basic story: The Children of Tama have sent out a signal that they'd like to try and open relations with the Federation. Attempts have been made in the past to communicate with them, but these attempts have all failed. (In retrospect, we have to accept a little bit of a stretch here. While the Tamarians' grammar is certainly confusing and difficult to grasp for an outsider, I'm not sure I buy that no one had ever made the basic leap that Picard makes here. Again, it works better if we assume this is just symbolic of a more complex issue. The Tamarians represent a different kind of thinking, and the only way to really connect with them is to be placed in a situation where understanding is vital to survival.) The *Enterprise* follows the signal, meets the Tamarian ship, and talks break down almost immediately. After a heated conversation between Dathon and, presumably, his first officer, the Tamarians beam Dathon and Picard down to the planet and put up a disrupter force field preventing the *Enterprise* from beaming Picard back, or contacting him in any way.

At first, Picard believes that Dathon intends to fight him; the knives Dathon keeps waving around would seem to support this theory. But it turns out the knives are actually protection against invisible-ish beastie that eventually attacks both men. It's all about trying to force a friendship in the heat of battle, of risking everything to try and make contact, and while Dathon eventually pays the full price for his commitment, the connection is made. Picard is able to save the *Enterprise* and make peace with the remaining Tamarians at the last minute, speaking to them in a way they can understand.

So in one way, this is a story we've seen many times before: Two enemies (or, in this case, strangers on uncertain terms) slowly find a way towards mutual agreement in the face of death. What makes this work is that it forces you to think about why you say what you say and how we take for granted that our method of communication is the "real" one. It's one thing to meet a race that uses different words, but the Tamarians view language in a completely different way than we do. I think I've mentioned the great Stanislaw Lem here before; he's a science fiction writer who dealt with these ideas often in his work, and one of his central tenets was the very real possibility that, were we ever to meet an actual alien race, we'd have no way to exchange ideas with them at all. In *Solaris*, his most famous novel, a small group of scientists try and study what might be a living planet, and that planet sends up avatars in the form of people from those scientists' lives. In most sci-fi stories, those avatars would helpfully explain what was happening, and everybody would have a good cry, ala Jodie Foster and her dead dad in *Contact*. In *Solaris*, the avatars, like the hero's wife, who committed suicide before he left Earth to join the expedition, have no idea what's happening. No one does. The planet might be trying to study them, maybe it's trying to help them move on, or maybe it's just a reflex reaction, of no more meaning than a sneeze.

"Darmok" isn't quite at Stanislaw Lem levels of brilliance, but it, at least, is willing to admit that the Federation's open-hand policy towards new species isn't always as easy as it sounds. The *Trek* universe tends to be tediously homogeneous when it comes to creature design. There are occasional exceptions, and I don't think it's quite fair to hold an on-going television series to blame for being budget conscious. But while the Tamarians are visually the same humanoid type creatures we always get, there's at least an effort here at trying to convey the potential gulf between our expectations and the actual possibilities of alien contact. In the end, the best Picard can manage is to convey his grief over Dathon's death to the Tamarian crew and stave off a potential war. There's no serious treaty established, no negotiations begun. But he has taken the first step towards accepting that there are more things in Heaven and space than are dreamt of in Starfleet's philosophy. It's not a bad place to start.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- I considered dropping this down to an A-, as I really do wish that writers Joe Menosky and Philip LaZebnik had put a little more effort into the language concept here, but then, "Darmok" is an hour long, and they needed something that was strong enough to get across in a short period of time. One episode isn't really enough time to go full Tolkein.
- Also, it would make me terribly sad to give any episode where Patrick Stewart relates the story of Gilgamesh less than an A.
- Worf comes back to duty, and immediately, everybody starts reminding him how he's wrong about everything.

Next week: We meet everybody's favorite "Ensign Ro," and I try not to make any Pamela Anderson jokes during "Silicon Avatar."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Ensign Ro"/"Silicon Avatar"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[2/24/11 10:00AM](#)

"Ensign Ro"

Or The One Where The Cardassians Mistake Picard For A Fool

To sum up: A new bad-ass female character! Also, Guinan. Ugh.

Well, there's a bit more going on beyond that. "Ensign Ro" introduces us to the Bajoran race, the Space Jews (basically), who've been persecuted by the evil Cardassians (who are pretty darn evil this time around); these guys and this conflict are going to end up being a lot more important in *Deep Space Nine*. In fact, it's one of the fundamental conflicts of that show, to the point where I had to actually make sure "Ro" was the first time we'd heard of the Bajorans. The Cardassians first popped up in last season's "The Wounded," and the two alien species are so inextricably bound together in the franchise's mythology, I half assumed we'd heard about Bajor back then too. But we hadn't. So here they are, all bad feelings and refugee camps and nose bridge wrinkles. And, in the case of one Ro Laren, hot, hot hotness.

Okay, okay, that's a bit dick (word play!). It's not fair to turn one of the show's first really interesting and exciting recurring female characters into Hottie of the Week. And yes, you read right; five seasons in, and we're only now getting a woman who isn't either painfully underwritten (hi, Bev!) or just painful (hi, Troi!). There have been passable one-offs before (I think, right? There have to have been), and both Beverly Crusher and Deanna Troi have had their moments. Hell, Lwaxana Troi wasn't all terrible the last time she was here, although don't tell her I said that. But there's something new about Ro, something that makes her interesting from her first moments on the *Enterprise* on. Yes, partly that's because Michelle Forbes is a nice looking woman, but Forbes is also a terrific actress, able to give weight to even utter absurdity like her role as "Pagan Goddess of Sexing It Up" in the second

season of *True Blood*. There's steel in her, which isn't really something you can say about the show's usual female cast; hell, the only male I can see standing toe to toe with her is Picard, and *maybe* Riker on a good day.

The last time we saw Forbes on the show, she was in the unenviable task of trying to convince her father to commit suicide in "Half a Life." Her character here is just as driven, but her internal conflicts are far more sympathetic. For one, she's actually *conflicted* about them, instead of playing a one note concept created solely to help prop up the episode's central argument. Ro is tricky. She arrives on the *Enterprise* with the chip on her shoulder pre-installed, and Riker's immediate order to remove her Bajoran ear-pieces doesn't improve the room temperature. (Riker is uber-dickish here, probably because of Ro's reputation. I doubt he'd dress down any other new ensign for having a bit of jewelry.) Ro comes with a past, which only comes clear gradually over the course of the episode, but her frustration is clear from the outset. This is someone who's been repeatedly instructed on the possible depths of betrayal, and she's learned her lesson very well.

Another point to recommend this episode is that it keeps the complicated politics the show has been slowly bringing to the forefront in the past few seasons, and it does so without belaboring the point or getting too tied up in the details. The situation is set down clearly and concisely. Once upon a time, the people of Bajor were super-advanced. Like, even better than humans, which, I know, is totally hard to believe, but I'm serious. Then they had the misfortune of meeting the Cardassians, who, having just had their reality show cancelled, weren't in a very pleasant mood. The Cardassian subjugated the race, eventually kicking them off their home planet, and now, the Bajorans live in isolated pockets through the galaxy, struggling to make ends meet. Some of them aren't particularly happy about this, and they've formed resistance groups. One of those resistance groups, led by a Two-Face wannabe named Orta, apparently just blew up a Federation outpost. As the Federation has done it's damndest to stay out of the fight (Prime Directive again), this is a very big deal.

Which is how the *Enterprise* gets involved, as Admiral Kennelly charges Picard with tracking Orta and his Bajoran down to make some kind of deal. Kennelly assigns Ro to the ship as well, ostensibly to aid in the negotiations, but really because he's given Ro a secret mission to offer Orta equipment the Federation has no intention of delivering. Kennelly has actually made a secret deal with the Cardassians to draw Orta out of hiding, so that the Cardassians can take care of their problem and, in doing so, seemingly resolve a sticky situation for the Federation as well. It's up to Picard to untangle the situation, and things get really tricky when he meets Orta face to face and Orta denies ever attacking any Federation outposts. Which makes you wonder who would do such a thing; who might benefit from tricking an ally into believing they have a common enemy...

Not that hard to unpack, really, but the implications here are potentially devastating. For one, by the end of the episode, it's clear that the Cardassians were responsible for the destroyed outpost, which at the very least throws their relationship with the Federation into question. This isn't the sort of situation where everyone can just shake hands and agree mistakes were made; there's a question of proof, but if the folks at Starfleet are able to provide any, the whole balance of power might shift. (I realize I could look this up on Wikipedia, as *Deep Space Nine* does a lot with the set-up, but I'd rather go on with vague memories and fingers crossed.) There's also a definite questioning of the value of the Prime Directive, as the Bajorans suffering is unequivocal, and their persecution at the hands of the Cardassians is impossible to justify. Besides, it's not like the Bajorans were significantly less advanced than the Federation. This isn't "let's not mess with a still developing culture." This is "Well, Vietnam sucked, so maybe we should not do that." Well, roughly. The problem is, there are clear good guys and bad guys here, which makes non-interference increasingly difficult to justify. You can see even Picard struggling with his convictions. Sure, he stands by them, but he's clearly satisfied at pulling a fast one on the Cardassians in the end.

So, we've got a straightforward conflict with engaging undercurrents. And we've got Ro, who, as I said, is terrific. Antagonistic characters on this show are too often strident irritants or morally corrupt bureaucrats, so it's great to

have someone who, at least at first, doesn't much care for the *Enterprise* and doesn't immediately worship Picard or Riker or anyone else. Ro's surliness, while it lasts, is one of the rare times that *TNG* has managed to have a frustrated character who doesn't immediately seem overly hateful or falsely confrontational. Generally, the *Enterprise* crew is such a swell bunch that whenever someone shows up and doesn't immediately drink the Flavor Aid, that person almost always comes off as exaggeratedly unreasonable. Ro doesn't. There's something almost refreshing in her unwillingness to be chums.

Of course she has to warm to Picard eventually, and the reason why is the episode's big stumbling point: Guinan. The character has been used well before, but lately, every time she shows up on screen, she drags the episode to a screeching halt, churning out cringe-worthy, pat dialogues that belongs in the climax of some terrible children's film. Here, she forces her friendship on Ro, which somehow leads to Ro trusting her, which then leads to Guinan bringing her to confess her problems to Picard. Once Guinan leaves the room, it's a fine scene. In fact, everything in this episode that doesn't feature Guinan works very well. And yet, there she is, dragging us down half a letter grade. There are half a dozen other, better ways to handle Ro's transition from skeptic to reluctant believer, and the hand-holding we get here is probably the worst. (Well, I guess she could've fallen in love with Riker and/or Barclay. That would've been worse.) Thankfully, the rest of the episode is strong enough that this is just a blip in an otherwise excellent hour.

Grade: A-

Stray Observations:

- I think the *Enterprise*'s commitment to quality occasionally goes a little too far. I mean, do they really need "The Best Barber in Starfleet"! (That said, I'm always amused by Picard's complete inability to deal with the overly gregarious. It's not hard to relate.)
- Ro uses the word "assimilate" in reference to her unwillingness to let go of Bajoran customs. That has to be a loaded word for Starfleet, and Picard especially.
- Ro's shame: She was on an away team, and she didn't follow orders, and eight people died. Unless I missed something, we don't get more than that.

"Silicon Avatar"

Or The One Where Data Talks Like A Teenager

So we're in the fifth season, right? The longer a show like this goes on, the more likely the writers are to bring back characters or threats from earlier episodes. We've had a handful of recurring faces. Every year seems to bring us another Q episode or some more face time with Lwaxana. But "Silicon Avatar" is a call-back I wasn't expecting at all, pulling a creature from way back in the first season episode, "Datalore." And it's not the one who had any lines. I spent a good chunk of "Silicon" wondering if Lore would show up, but the show here belongs to his old pal, the Crystalline Entity, and a deeply, deeply disturbed woman named Dr. Kila Marr. Like "Ensign Ro," this isn't a perfect episode; I'd rank it lower than "Ensign," as the guest actress here (Ellen Geer) isn't quite up to the task. But "Avatar" is still strong, and refreshingly bleak in its conclusions.

Speaking of bleak, as cold opens go, this one is uncharacteristically dark. Riker is helping some colonists settle into their new home; said help involves letting Data and Beverly do science-y things over yonder, while chatting up the cute colony leader. Their conversation leads to what has to be the most blatant double entendre on the show in a while ("I provide the most memorable desserts,"), and it's pretty clear Riker is going to get lucky, at least until the Entity shows up and kills the poor woman. (I suppose I could make a joke here about how she escaped a fate worse than death, but I'm sure Riker is perfectly adequate in his romantic duties. The beard does most of the work,

probably.) Riker, Data, Beverly, and most of the rest of the colonists hide in a nearby cave while the Entity lays waste to the countryside. Once the danger passes, the *Enterprise* arrives and pulls the group out of their hole. The damage is catastrophic, and an official decision is made: The Entity must be dealt with, once and for all.

To aid this, Dr. Kila Marr comes aboard the ship. Marr is an expert on the Entity; her 16-year-old son was killed by the creature, during the same attack that killed the colonists on Data's home world. Unsurprisingly, she doesn't particularly like Data at first contact, lumping him in with Lore as a potential threat because of Lore's relationship with the Entity. Data deals with this as he always deals with emotional assault: patiently, but with a slight look of confusion on his face, like a man who isn't quite sure what language he's hearing. So we get an act's worth of one of my least favorite recurring *TNG* motifs, the "let's be mean to Data" plot. It's fairly ridiculous here, as it always is; while Marr's bad feelings aren't impossible to understand, her refusal to hide them in any way is at best unprofessional and at worst downright foolish. None of it bothers Data, of course, but it makes her come off as a narrow-minded fool.

Admittedly, she kind of is a fool, and it's not like super-smart people of any era are always going to be the most emotionally unstable. It's just not much fun to watch, because it's all one note, and whether or not Data is offended, it's unpleasant to see a character we care about so openly despised. Thankfully, Marr comes around to the android, and it doesn't take her all that long to do so. Points to the episode, then, for recognizing that it's very difficult to hold a grudge against someone who refuses to gloat or wince at your insults. (In fact, it seems like Marr loses her interest in baiting him after realizing just this.) Instead of taking the full hour to show Marr gradually softening her hostilities, we change tacks before the midpoint, when the doctor learns that Data has memories and records from all the colonists on Omnicron Theta. That means he has her dead son's journals floating around inside his skull. And then things get awkward.

Really, Geer is the weak link here. Given the consequences of her increased obsession with Data's stored memories and the way she uses those memories to try and recreate her connection to her son, it's hard to argue that anyone involved on the episode thought that Data speaking in the dead kid's voice was a good thing. And yet Marr's reaction goes beyond grief-stricken madness into something disappointingly close to camp, undermining the scenes to the point where their creepiness is so obvious, it's uncomfortable to watch. In order for "Silicon" to be completely effective, we need to feel some sympathy towards Marr. Instead, she's just an overly obvious crazy person, which makes it far more difficult to take the ethical problem at the heart of the episode seriously.

Which is a shame, because it's a problem worth taking seriously. Marr assumes (and it's another mark in favor of the episode that, until we hear otherwise, her assumptions seem entirely reasonable) that the *Enterprise's* mission to track down the Entity will result in a battle and the Entity's destruction. But Picard insists that she and Data work out some way to communicate with the creature. He argues that it has as much right to live as they do, and it's possible to both see where he's coming from and still believe he's wrong. Given that most people in the audience would be siding with Marr at this point (or, because she's a nutbag, they'll be siding with Riker, who also has serious reservations about not killing the Entity on sight), the episode goes a little too far in sticking by Picard's point of view. After all, this creature has killed hundreds, if not thousands; at a certain point, "right to live" becomes questionable in the face of all that death.

And yet it's refreshing to see the show so willing to stick to its guns that whether or not you agree with Picard, his position is still obviously consistent with his character. He is a man who persists in demanding the best of all possible worlds, of acknowledging the limitations of the universe, while still insisting that he and his crew strive to rise above them. This nobility makes the climax of the episode surprisingly affecting. The Entity itself is an instantly dated bit of CGI wizardry, and it has little in the way of personality, apart from its structural beauty. But when Marr betrays Data and Picard and the others, and kills the creature while pretending to "speak" to it, it's unsettling. The

Crystalline Entity had killed, yes, but there was no way of knowing it had any understanding of what it did, and in those initial moments, Data had gained whatever trust it had to offer, and then that trust was betrayed.

Then Data asks to escort Marr back to her room, and for a moment, you think he'll offer some word of reconciliation, some final thought from her dead son to give her peace of mind. Marr has gone around the bend at this point, actively (and, one guesses, willingly) mistaking Data for her dead child, and you assume that, since this is *TNG*, there'll be an attempt to mollify the harshness of the previous scene. Instead, when Marr begs Data to tell her how her son would approve of her actions, Data tells her he believes her son would be unhappy with what she'd done. That her son valued her scientific passion and her respect for life, and that, in destroying the Entity, she betrayed this integrity. "Yes, I believe your son would be very sad now," he says. And that's the end. You'd think I would've gotten used to Data episodes ending this way, but it gets me every time. There are few things more powerful, and more devastating, than an inarguable truth.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Out Of Context Theater Presents: "You handle that unit like a veteran, doctor."
- Hey, remember how Troi's an empath? Remember how she's spent her life learning to read emotions and understand how people think? It's too bad she wasn't on the bridge when Marr killed the Entity, or else she could've warned... oh wait, that's right, she *was* on the bridge, and she didn't say a damn thing. Admittedly, Marr was so clearly unstable that everyone should've been on their guard anyway, but this is just absurd.

Next week: We take a trip through the imaginatively titled "Disaster" and learn where *Angry Birds* really started in "The Game."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Disaster"/"The Game"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[3/03/11 10:00AM](#)

"Disaster"

Or The One Where Picard Breaks An Ankle And Troi Doesn't Back Down

One of the ways you can tell the strength of a show's ensemble is how easy it is to pair off different characters. I don't mean romantically, although that can sometimes be a part of it. It's more that most episodes put the primary focus on a part of the larger cast; there are episodes which deal with most everyone at once (and yes, in a way "Disaster" is actually one of those episodes), but those can be difficult to balance. Besides, even in an episode like that, most scenes take place between only a handful of people at once, as they do in "Disaster." My point here is that on a bad show, there are some pairings that just won't work. The characters are too static and too incompatible to spark off each other in the way that good drama or comedy requires. In a good to great show, though, the actors are strong enough, and their performances rich enough, that the sky's the limit.

Whatever the problems *TNG* occasionally has handling some of its characters, its ensemble by now is a solid one. All the actors have settled into their roles, and the chemistry between them, at first somewhat forced and arbitrary, has become consistent, if a sometimes a little on the smarmy side. "Disaster," while not a big ticket episode with a high concept or epic sweep, is a fun outing that gives nearly everyone a chance to show off how far they've come and how well this series has earned our trust. It's fun, occasionally intense, surprisingly sweet hour; it's not essential, but it does have one of the funniest scenes in *Trek* history, and for once, the joke is on purpose.

The set up: The *Enterprise* is basically just hanging out in space, having completed some heavy duty work recently and taking a much needed break from the usual world-saving and Romulan-bashing. In Ten-Forward, Keiko and

O'Brien are showing off Keiko's baby bump and discussing potential names with Riker, Worf, and Data, in one of the cargo bays, Beverly and Geordi work together while Beverly tries to convince Geordi to appear in her production of *The Pirates of Penzance*, and on the bridge, Picard prepares to take three children, all science fair winners, on a tour of the ship. It's all a little bland and dorky, but then, that's kind of what these people are in their natural state. If I've learned anything over the course of this project, it's that in order to appreciate *TNG*, you have to embrace the utter lack of cool.

Thankfully, before we can devolve into a very special episode of *Full House*, a science calamity strikes: something to do with a "quantum filament," and a lot of other words that I lump together in the category of "effective bullshit." (I suppose this exposes my ignorance, but really, while I'm sure the science here is somewhat well justified, it's basically a MacGuffin to make everything else possible. So whenever O'Brien or Ro start explaining, I mostly just hear the adults from *Peanuts* cartoons going "wah wah wah.") Because of this calamity, the *Enterprise* is thrown into chaos. The turbolifts shut down, trapping Picard and the three children inside, stranding Troi with O'Brien and, eventually, Ro, on the bridge. Beverly and Geordi face off against a plasma fire in the bay, and while Riker and Data try and fix the malfunction in the bowels of the ship's engines, Worf helps Keiko give birth to her first child.

So everybody gets their own story, and those stories all work, to varying degrees of success. The best, for my money, is Worf and Keiko; it's slight, only a couple of scenes, but it's one of the best uses of Worf I've seen, providing him with a hilarious comic set-piece that doesn't require him to be the butt of the joke. Sure, part of the humor comes from his strident approach to cervical dilation, but it's sympathy humor. Too often, *TNG* resorts to turning Worf into a kind of reluctant Data, constantly requiring lectures from the people around him on how to be more "human." But here, his confusion is easy to relate to, and it's so, so funny. It's also undramatic, which, depending on your point of view, is disappointing or a relief. (In this case, anyway, I didn't mind the light touch.)

Actually, there's precious little drama in any of the plot arcs here, even the ones that try and create tension. "Disaster"'s biggest problem is that it tries to do too much; there are five distinct threads running here, and a few of them inevitably wind up shortchanged. The biggest victim of this is Troi's time as commanding officer on the Bridge. It's an awkward set-up to begin with. Ro and O'Brien debate the best approach to the situation, and Troi fights to keep the panicked look on her face. On the one hand, I appreciate the effort to give her something to do, but it's embarrassing to watch her squirm this way. While it's understandable that she'd be stressed under these conditions, she looks *terrified*, like she wandered into a surgery and somebody forced a scalpel into her hand. It just makes her seem foolish, which is troubling enough for a character who needs every precious ounce of dignity she can find. Her arc here is to find her spine and prove herself worthy of command, but given the intensity of her panic at the beginning, the transition never comes across as satisfyingly as it should. Instead, it just seems like Troi grabbed onto something she could actually understand—the possibility there might be someone alive in engineering—and clung to it. That's not leadership; that's drowning.

As for the rest, well, Riker and Data is as fun as you'd expect, and the image of Riker fiddling with Data's bodiless head is wonderfully surreal. Beverly and Geordi are fine, although their story suffers a little from unimaginative writing. They experience a crisis, they come up with a solution, and that solution works exactly as intended. That's not awful, but it's not really memorable, either. Picard's time with the kids is more effective and sweet in a way I thought might be too much, but it isn't. All three kids are charmingly awkward, and Stewart does a good job of showing his mild discomfort at being around children (which has been a consistent character trait since the first season) without overplaying it. That he focuses on Marissa, the girl of the group, to be his "first officer" is excellent, especially considering the show's troubled history with female characters. And I'm not made of stone: The plaque the kids make for Picard to commemorate their time together is just too damn adorable for words. "Disaster" tries to do too much, but its ambition does it credit, and when it works, it's very charming.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Goodbye, Lt. Monroe. You were competent, and you paid the ultimate price.
- I didn't expect to see Ro again so soon. And this was a good use of her, too.
- "Congratulations. You are now fully dialted to 10 centimeters. You may now give birth."
- I haven't thought about "Frere Jacques" in years.

"The Game"

Or The One Where We Learn the Real Reason The Virtual Boy Failed

Well, that certainly was silly, wasn't it.

For the first 20 or so minutes of "The Game," I was enjoying myself. The episode wasn't great, and I wasn't, y'know, delighted to see Wesley "Mr. Whisper Thin" Crusher back on the ship, but there was some good momentum building, and it was fun to watch everybody slowly turn evil because they really liked electronic orgasms. Body snatcher storylines always creep me out, even more so than if somebody was just sneaking through the ship and killing everyone. I don't know why (obviously "murder" is a bit more permanent than "mind control that can be undone with a flashlight"). Maybe it's that sneaking suspicion that the people around me wouldn't really notice if I was replaced. If you're dead, there's some comfort in imagining the grief caused by your passing, but if someone takes your place, and no one realizes it, who's to say you were ever really there at all?

I'm getting distracted, though, and that's probably because "The Game" is a very easy episode to get distracted from. In the last 20 minutes, while Wesley and his girl Friday, Robin Lefler (a young, vaguely chipmunk-ish but still ridiculously adorable Ashley Judd), run around the *Enterprise* trying to save the day from the dastardly butt-forehead aliens, I found my attention starting to wander. Yes, it was all very tense, and yes, there was some fun to be had in seeing Wesley ably avoid pursuit by being the clever brat he always is, but something felt... off. The game that caused all these problems was hilariously tacky, both in form and function, but that was only part of the problem. I'd heard friends complain about the episode before, and the more I watched, the more I realized I agreed with them, but why? This was suspenseful and occasionally surprising, and the gradual, corner-of-your-eye domination of the ship's crew by the Gameboy From Hell (yes, I know that's dated, I'm old) was deftly handled, for what it was. Why didn't it work?

The big issue here is that this isn't really a proper episode of *TNG* at all. It's more a children's cartoon script that happened to be filmed in live action. "The Game" doesn't really fit our *Enterprise*, and while it's unsettling enough on the surface, it falls apart if you think about it for more than a few minutes. There's nothing of any real depth here, and our heroes are forced out of their usual roles into simply operating as cogs in a disappointingly straightforward machine. The fact that Wesley arrives on the ship just as all this foolishness is going down and he happens to be the only person (with an assist from his new girlfriend, of course) capable of saving the day? That's the worst kind of Mary Sue writing. I supposed you could say this is an intentionally nostalgic throwback to the first season, where Wesley was, quite literally, a Chosen One. (Yeah, I bet you forgot that.) But given how terrible the first season was, why on Earth would you reference it? Besides, "Ensigns of Command" managed to give us a Wesley who was convincingly, but not ridiculously, smart and good at his job. Here, the idea that he'd be one of the only two people on the ship to escape the Game's clutches long enough to realize its sinister purpose is, well, silly.

The story: Riker is hooking up with Etana, she of the butt-shaped forehead, but before their innuendo can go from "stun" to "screw," Etana convinces Riker to try out this new game she's discovered. Riker puts on the device (which looks like it was repurposed from equipment you'd find in in a dentist's office) and is immediately engaged by a VR-

ish game that revolves around mentally commanding discs to dive into tunnels. This is in every way exactly as stupid as it sounds, but the game works by stimulating your pleasure centers every time you complete a level, which is something Riker is totally into. It also has a nasty habit of rewiring part of your brain, and when Riker brings the device back to the *Enterprise*, he slowly starts to infect everyone on board with the Happy Funtime Let's Let The Aliens Take Us Over virus.

While all this wackiness is going down, there's some big science afoot, a fact that I completely forgot about until just now because the episode forgets about it as well. We don't see anyone jockeying for the time slots we're told are crucial to a number of group's research. We're told times are stressful and Geordi is a little more tightly wound than usual, but the fact that nearly everyone on board is soon devoting all their time to something that has nothing to do with work doesn't seem to affect, well, anything. Wesley shows up, there's a goofy surprise party, and then everything starts going to hell. It seems like all that static about scientific study was designed to raise the stakes for the rest of the episode, but it doesn't; in the end, the best you can say is that all that extra work is making everyone tired, distracted, and in the mood for any kind of entertainment, even if it does nuke your cerebral cortex.

"The Game" is occasionally creepy, although not always in ways that are that fun to watch. Data getting essentially cold-cocked in Sick Bay is a nice moment, a relative surprise that takes out the *Enterprise*'s big security blanket while at the same time revealing the widening scope of the conspiracy; there are a couple of fine shots of brainwashed Riker and the others looming over Data's fallen body that give a neat "time is out of joint" feel to the scene. Of course, it's hard to understand why they don't just take Data out permanently. I'm sure they wanted to make his collapse look like an "accident," but the fact that Wesley is able to fix him with a minimum of fuss, thus providing the episode with its resolution, is weak; I don't want Data to be dead, but I also don't much enjoy a story where the villains give the heroes free passes. (For that matter, why single out the *Enterprise* for initial take-over, considering it has a rare crew-member completely immune to the game's charms? Yes, this is the flagship of Starfleet, but surely it would've made more sense to target one of the many ships without the Kryptonite, so to speak.)

At the same time, watching Beverly's aggressive attempts to win her son over to the Orgasmatron are off-putting in all kinds of wrong ways, her usual maternal affection degraded into something uncomfortably intimate and desperate. "The Game" could be seen as a metaphor for any kind of addiction, and while it's a shallow metaphor at best, the few glimpses we get of how *TNG* would handle actual narcotics make me hope desperately that we never get into Willow-on-the-ceiling territory here. There's some OK stuff in "The Game": Wesley and Robin's courtship isn't utterly unbearable—oh, who am I kidding, it mostly is, but Judd is just so damn cute I didn't mind. I also like the part where Michael Douglas shoots Sean Penn and then jumps off a building. Really, though, this is a script that doesn't fit the complexity and depth of *TNG* in its fifth season, relying on broadly drawn conflicts (a better episode might've considered just what the hell you do with a race that's invented a device that can spread mind control this easily and efficiently) and hoary story tricks to make its point. If it even has a point; if this is intended as an indictment of the horrors of video games, it fails pretty miserably. Everyone involved deserved better. Even Wesley.

Grade: C

Stray Observations:

- I love that they give you a warning sign by never bothering to give the game a proper title. "Look, we just don't care enough to pretend this matters. Maybe you should go do some laundry, this will be over soon."
- Troi's lecture on the wonders of chocolate is so, so ridiculously specific that it's almost genius. It really belongs in a Jean Teasdale column. (More seriously, why does the show repeatedly insist on making her the

underdog? I can buy that being an empath carries its share of problems, but Troi's moping is always bizarrely generic, as though she stumbled into the series by way of a *Cathy* comic strip.)

- Riker tells Geordi he needs to "unwind a little." Geordi, who has yet to experience the game and is in no way mind-controlled, gives in immediately, despite the fact that Data is, for all intents and purposes, lying dead in the other room. I'm not even talking about sentimentality here; as far as I can tell, Data isn't prone to malfunction, so you'd think his best friend on the ship would be a *little* more concerned.
- Robin and Wesley, after realizing that nearly everyone on board the ship has been taken over by the game, split up for no real reason. I *hate* that.
- Wheaton is rather terrifyingly thin in this episode. He looks to be constructed out of well-tanned pipe cleaners.
- Hey, so now we know Riker's o-face. Thanks, show.

Next week: We take on the double header of "Unification I" and "Unification II." I hear we may bump into an old friend...

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Unification, Parts I and II"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[3/10/11 10:00AM](#)

"Unification, parts I and II"

Or The One With Spock, and Romulans, and More Sela

I always thought two part episodes were a good thing. There's something bold about them that appeals to me. Holding an audience's interest over an hour is impressive enough, but two hours? That means you have to be sure of your story, and that means that whatever story you're trying to tell has to be a pretty big deal. It has to be so important, so Earth shaking, that we're willing to disrupt the regular structural flow just to give it the attention it deserves. And that is so, so exciting. Television gives us comfort in the form of routine, promising us that every week, we'll see the same faces, at the same time, doing roughly the same thing. There's a lot to be said for that, just as there's a lot to be said for when a show breaks that routine, either in small ways or large ones. It's exciting, and it makes whatever happens in the episodes that step outside the format automatically more important.

When I was a kid, I was willing to accept that importance on faith. Honestly, I was willing to accept just about anything that happened in art on faith, and if I had a problem with it, I assumed that was my fault, not the artist. If this character was particularly irritating or if a certain storyline bored me, well, I just wasn't appreciating it properly. My tastes were getting in the way of what I was trying to appreciate, and because of that, I was bad, and I should feel bad. So it never even occurred that a two-parter has to earn its super size status. To me, "To Be Continued..." was just something that *happened*, not something any writer or producer could be directly responsible for. It sounds ridiculous now, but I sometimes wonder if that willingness to accept whatever TV and books gave me as incontrovertible fact didn't, in a roundabout way, lead me to the sort of work I do here at the A.V. Club: because once I did start questioning just why Dawn got on my nerves so badly, or why I found newer Stephen King novels

like *Insomnia* such an agonizing slog, I took to writing to try and work through what was bothering me. (Although weirdly, I still feel a little guilty about having all these opinions and everything.)

So, I've been paying more attention to two-part episodes than I used to, both here and over at our [X-Files coverage](#), because I'm fascinated by the difference between a successful example of the form (like "Best of Both Worlds") and a less successful one. "Unification" falls into the latter camp, sadly, although there's enough here that does work and works well that I didn't begrudge the amount of time spent. A good double episode isn't exactly like a movie, although it's a little like that, and it's not exactly like heavy serialization, although it's a bit like that as well. A good double episode should be an event; it should be to a series what a show-stopping solo is to a musical, revolving around an idea that's so powerful, so important, that it couldn't possibly be expressed in any other way. The problem is, like I said, we have a tendency to appreciate off-format when it happens for its own sake, and that magical roman numeral at the end of an episode title creates a Pavlovian stimulus response. The excitement comes built in, and the cliffhanger ending of part one feeds into that excitement. Which makes it difficult to separate the content from the style, especially seeing as how the disappointment when the form doesn't work doesn't usually hit till the second part, and that doesn't always mean the second part is the problematic one.

In the case of "Unification," both halves have some flaws, but the biggest, most glaring mistake to me has to be the presence of Sela, who is clearly intended to be the face of Romulan repression and villainy. I like the idea of the Romulans getting a specific avatar, because of all the important races in the *Trek* franchise, they seem the least defined, an amalgam of Klingon and Vulcan philosophies who remain one of the only major holdouts to the Federation's, well, Borg-like ability to pull in other cultures. (Really, *isn't* Starfleet like some benevolent Borg? Sure, their first and foremost principle is avoiding interference, but they still make sure they're on hand to welcome races who are just starting to explore the galaxy. It's part of *TNG*'s general optimism that, despite the occasional lapses by individuals, the Federation is essentially a force for good; I'm not sure I'm enough of an idealist at this point to believe this would be possible in the real world.) While it's nice to have a culture that isn't clearly associated with a specific emotional trait, there seems like a lot of untapped story potential here. Giving us a few specific Romulans, helping us to understand what drives them, bringing them back once a season and showing how those drives change over time: All would've made a great contrast to the slow death of the Klingon Empire.

The problem here is that, while we get some fascinating concepts thrown around, "Unification" is about at once too much and too little and never quite lives up to the strength of its premise. Sela is part of the problem, and her appearance near the end of "Part I" had me wincing, but even before then, something felt a little off. It's obvious why the show tried to milk this for two episodes. If you can get Leonard Nimoy on your show, playing the most iconic character in the franchise (yes, I think Spock is more iconic than Kirk, although the distinction is negligible), you want to get as much out of that as you can. And from a dramatic standpoint, "Unification" does a great job of building to Spock's arrival in the final moments of "Part I." We first get a glimpse of him in the cold open, when a Starfleet Admiral informs Picard that one of their most important ambassadors has gone missing; she shows Picard a shot from a security scan, and when Spock's face comes into focus, Picard is clearly shocked.

It's a fitting reaction, considering how shocking a moment this would be for anyone in the audience who didn't know this was coming, but it's also well-justified. As Picard later explains to Riker, because of his bond with Sarek, he has a certain connection with Spock as well. "Unification" divides its time between Picard and Data's search for Spock (heh) and Riker and the rest of the *Enterprise*'s attempts to... um... Well, mostly it's their attempts to fill out the running time so that Spock can show up in the final minutes of "Part I." Plot-wise, they're hunting down the source of some spaceship parts, which leads to a sort of mystery, and then another *Trek* version of Mos Eisley with one of the ugliest make-up jobs I've ever seen on the show. (That's in "Part II." The multi-armed lady who plays keyboards has what can only be described as a nose vagina.)

It's not badly made, and it does mean that when Riker is confronted with the Romulan's invasion forces (cleverly hidden inside Vulcan ships), he knows enough of what's going on that he's able to thwart the surprise attack. Only since Spock and Data managed to send out a message from Romulus before Riker acts, it's hard not to view roughly a third (or more) of "Unification" as pleasant but wasted time. There are some good jokes, and Riker gets to threaten a fat Ferengi (who has space bimbos! Is this a first for *TNG*? Excluding "Justice," of course), but unless I'm missing something, there's no reason for any of this. We don't need to know how the Romulans got Vulcan ships; we just need to know what they plan on doing with them.

That leaves us with Picard, Data, and Spock. And Romulus. And, of course, Sela. It's always great to see Picard and Data have a team-up, although even here, we have to wade through some unnecessary plotting to get to the good stuff. Picard decides he needs a ship with a cloaking device in order to make the trip across the Neutral Zone to Romulus, so the *Enterprise* pays a visit to the Klingon homeworld to see if Gowron is willing to return one of the many favors he owes the Federation. There's some telling detail here about how Gowron tries to avoid contact with Picard because he's busy re-writing history to make his victories entirely his own; this makes sense from what we know of Gowron, and it fits that, even after everything, relations with the Klingons aren't exactly perfect.

Picard gets his ship, though, and we waste more time meeting the crew of that ship, watching Picard react to the sparseness of Klingon crew accommodations, and seeing him and Data chat a bit. Most of this is enjoyable, but, again, enjoyable isn't really enough in a two-parter. The crew of the Klingon ship has no real impact on the core of this story, Spock's attempts to unify Vulcan and Romulus, and they play no real part in the second half, outside of being grumpy that it's taking Picard so long to finish his mission. We've seen Klingons screw around with Starfleet personnel before, and we don't learn anything new here, even if Stewart makes what he can out of it.

One of the hardest things to accept about writing a story is that good stories are hardly ever a matter of starting at point A and then showing all the steps that led to points B through Zed. It's something that comes up in a lot of creative writing classes, because when you're not sure of your instincts on what to tell, the big temptation is to tell *everything*. So, yes, from a character perspective, everything in "Part I" is reasonable enough. But I'm guessing it only really exists because the showrunners wanted to milk the most out of Spock's return and to make sure the final scene of the episode bookended the cold open, with Nimoy in the flesh stepping out of the shadows to announce himself to Picard and Data.

Out of everything else, the best scene in "Part I" is Picard paying Sarek a visit, in order to get his thoughts on where Spock is and what he's trying to do. The last we saw of Sarek, he wasn't doing so well, and he's considerably worse here; while "Unification" makes some interesting stabs at getting us invested in the plight of the Romulan people, the real emotional core here is Sarek's awful decline and the broken relationship between him and his son. Mark Lenard's final scene is painful to watch, and, if you'll permit me a slight touch of the melodramatic, it casts a shadow over everything else that happens. Picard learns on the way to Romulus that Sarek has died. We expect our favorite characters to resolve their issues before their story ends, and it's always a surprise when this doesn't happen, even when the conflict is a minor one. Sarek dies without ever seeing his son one last time. That's harsh, and good drama.

All right, so what about the actual stuff in this double feature that's "relevant"? Picard and Data surgically transform themselves to look like Romulans and beam down to Romulus to hunt for Spock; from Sarek, Picard learned that Spock has a personal relationship with a Romulan senator named Pardek. Before Picard and Data can make contact, though, they're picked up by Pardek's men, brought to the secret rebel base under the city, and that's when Spock comes in. In "Part II," we learn that Spock is trying to bring about the reunification of Romulus and Vulcan. It's a bit of a stretch, but from what he's heard, he believes the time is right to start pushing for a change. But of course it isn't. Proconsul Neral, who seems so open to the idea of bringing the two races back together, is actually just working with Sela on a surprise invasion.

I'm not really sure how much sense this all makes. A Romulan surprise attack, well, I can accept that, but all this subterfuge with Spock? Apart from giving us a Stunning Twist, it all seems like a lot of effort for not much return. If they really needed Spock to make his announcement, why not just kidnap him as soon as he landed on the planet; letting him run around fomenting rebellion is not a good long term strategy. But maybe I'm missing something, so I'll let that lie. I remain uninterested in Denise Crosby, especially in this role. She isn't threatening, and there's no pleasure in seeing Sela again, working behind the scenes to ruin everyone's day. It feels mean-spirited to pick her apart any further considering, so let's just say, better choices could've been made here.

And yet... there's still a lot here that works. Mainly, it's Spock. If you didn't read my *TOS* reviews, I'll bring you up to speed: I'm a big ol' Spock fan, and the simple fact of his presence here was enough to get me past a significant number of bumps. Nimoy doesn't get enough to do. Unlike "Sarek," which managed to balance the character against the necessities of plot, all the story threads and Romulan trickery don't allow us to get much of a sense of who Spock is now and why he's willing to take this chance. Nimoy manages to sell it anyway, and his gravitas, combined with Stewart's, gives this foolishness a lot more weight than it probably deserves. And while they only get a couple scenes together, pairing Data with Spock is sublime. Data has always served as *TNG*'s Outsider figure, just as Spock served the same role on *TOS*. The difference is, Spock was proud of his outsider status, while Data is forever working to minimize it. There are only the briefest of nods to this, but that it's alluded to at all is great.

I like the idea of the Romulans naturally moving towards the Vulcan philosophy as a part of their cultural evolution. (It reminds me a little of the controversial last chapter of *A Clockwork Orange*, although the concept works much better here.) That Spock decides to stay behind isn't much of a surprise, although I'm not sure how long he'd be able to avoid capture with the whole weight of the government intent on tracking him down. I can't help wondering, though, how much better this episode might have been if it had given more time to Spock, instead of losing him in a mess of double-crosses and political intrigue. Like, if maybe this had just been a single episode and if it had focused on Picard trying to bring Spock and Sarek back together. In the last scene of "Part II," Picard invites Spock to mind meld with him, to give him a final connection to his father. Spock touches Picard's face, and it's a beautiful, fleeting mixture of the old with the new, the wonderful, absurd passion of the original series mixed with the thoughtful compassion of the new. The rest of "Unification" doesn't really live up to this, but just having it is nearly enough.

Stray Observations:

- "Unification" originally aired in November of 1991. Spock makes a reference to Kirk and the earlier *Enterprise* and their involvement with the Federation's peace negotiations with the Klingons. Interestingly enough, that involvement is the plot of *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, which hit theaters in December of 1991. I'm assuming the *TNG* writers had some idea of the plot of the movie before "Unification" was filmed, but it's odd. Spock's comment implies something went horribly wrong with the negotiations, bad enough to make him want to take a personal hand in the peace process from then on. But while bad things happen in *Country*, no one on the crew dies. So... huh.
- How heart-breaking was the site of Sarek trying, and failing, to make the traditional Vulcan hand gesture?
- These episodes must've been the first to air after Roddenberry died (October 24, 1991). There's a nod to him before each episode.
- Spock, on Picard: "There's an almost Vulcan quality to the man."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "A Matter Of Time"/"New Ground"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[3/17/11 10:00AM](#)

"A Matter of Time"

Or The One Where Max Headroom Tries To Pull A Fast One

By this point, we're all familiar with the various dangers of time travel. It'd be interesting, if you were of a mind to do it, and had the patience to track decades of science fiction, to see how the concept has developed over the years. Because surely at some point, it was just wish fulfillment or fantasy. H.G. Wells *The Time Machine* was largely a parable for the way social classes would eventually split into two distinct races; it was an adventure story that was less concerned with the possibilities of paradox than it was with extrapolating a distant future that helped Wells make a philosophical point. (Poor people will eventually become monsters; rich people will eventually all turn into Paris Hilton.) What I'm talking about is more jumping backwards in time and trying to change what was, in order to create a more positive present. By now, I can barely even type the idea without wanting to fall into an argument about the dangers of meddling, the butterfly effect, chaos theory, and how creepy it must've been for Marty McFly to jump into a completely different timeline, even if it did score him cooler parents and an awesome truck. But surely there was a time when people didn't take this quite so seriously.

I wonder if the ground zero moment for all this contemplation isn't Ray Bradbury's short story "A Sound of Thunder." First published in *Collier's* magazine in 1952, it's the sort of high concept, brutal gut-punch that only short stories are really capable of managing. In "Thunder," time travel is real, and a group of entrepreneurs use it to take rich big game hunters back into the distant past to hunt dinosaurs. Everything is carefully controlled to prevent any impact on the present. There's a path the hunters follow, and the T-Rex they kill is one that would actually have died moments later, even if it hadn't been shot. But of course something goes wrong, something very small on the

surface but something that changes everything. It's a fine story, turned into a terrible movie (and, according to Wikipedia, a book series?), and I always think of it whenever I get to thinking about time travel. The idea that someone could step on a butterfly and thus significantly change the course of history is one of those ideas that seems so horribly plausible you can't help but believe it's fact.

Although who knows? I'm stalling here a little, because in the end, "Matter of Time" isn't really that much about time travel. It's mostly about a clever con-man (played by Matt Frewer), and how he ingratiates himself (sort of) with the crew of the *Enterprise* while they do their best not to completely destroy a planet desperately in need of their help. Frewer, who calls himself Rasmussen (because it's easier to type "Frewer," I'm just going to stick with that), claims to be a historian from 300 years into the future. He's arrived just in time to watch Picard and crew handle a crisis on Penthara IV, and all he asks of them are the answers to a few questions, a couple minutes of their time, and maybe some spare technology they may have lying around. Oh, and if someone—say, Beverly Crusher—decided to sleep with him, he wouldn't have any problems with that, either.

It's obvious from the start that Frewer isn't who he says he is, which is one of the reasons I had a hard time getting behind "Matter." Any storyline that opens with a stranger making the claims Frewer makes is going to have to make an extra effort in order to fool us along with the rest of the cast. Obviously, a show like *TNG* has advantage here that something like, say, *CSI* doesn't. In the *Trek*-verse, we know that time travel is very real; nearly every major character in the franchise has engaged in it at some point or another. So at least when Frewer arrives in a ship like nothing anyone on the *Enterprise* has ever seen before, right next to a space-time distortion, well, it's not completely ridiculous that they'd give him the benefit of the doubt. And hell, as modest as everybody is about it, who wouldn't like some confirmation that everything you're doing right now is going to fascinate people centuries ahead of you?

My problem here is that the benefit stretches just a bit too far. Frewer's claims are potentially possible, but apart from his ship (which is just an unknown quantity) and the distortion, he can't really offer anything to back those claims up. He argues that it's his responsibility to his own time that prevents him from sharing more information with our heroes; much like that squished butterfly (or Homer's single sneeze), a misplaced factoid might alter crucial decisions and send events along an entirely new course. This is reasonable, but you'd think he'd have something to offer to help smooth the way. Maybe an additional piece of shiny future tech or restricted knowledge about, say, Picard's past that only future historians might have access to. Instead, he simply shows up and arrogantly makes his demands.

It's unfortunate, really, because I like Matt Frewer quite a bit, but his tightly-wound style isn't well used here. He's so immediately grating and unpleasant that you know from the start that he's running some kind of con. Which is funny, actually, because you'd think a real con-man would've actually tried to run more under the radar. Obviously in order to pull something like this off, it's necessary to have a certain confidence in your convictions (and Frewer largely maintains his cool until the very end), but this guy goes out of his way to irk people. You can defend this conceptually. After all, in the end, Frewer isn't really a con-man, just as he isn't really from the future; he's actually a failed inventor from the 22nd century who killed the historian the time machine actually belonged to and took his place. So it does make a certain amount of sense that he'd act like an ass. This really isn't his usual line of work.

Really, then, the issue is that everyone on the *Enterprise* trusts him for as long as they do before finally bringing the hammer down in the final scene. It's irritating to be this far ahead of the heroes for so long, and while it's not like their trusting nature ever puts any of them in any real danger, they still come across as a little too thick for my tastes. Riker wonders if he might be a fraud, but there's never any attempt to restrict his access to the ship or to force him to give more answers beyond the clearly evasive lines he keeps throwing out. Really, all the show needed was to tone down Frewer's attitude a few notches and throw us a bone of evidence that would give his story more credibility. (I

realize that since he isn't actually from the future, that bone might be difficult to come up with, but still.) At least then, Picard and the rest wouldn't look quite so naive.

It's a shame, really, because there was stuff here I did like. The B-plot, for instance: After an asteroid hits an unpopulated continent on Penthara IV, creating a giant dust cloud that creates a planet-wide drop in temperature, the *Enterprise* tries to fix the problem by shoot phasers into the planet's crust and kickstarting a greenhouse effect. This goes badly, and Picard is forced to make a decision. Either he lets the crisis on the planet play out, killing tens of thousands, or else he tries to fix things one more time with the *Enterprise*, with a solution that will either resolve the problem or kill everything on the planet surface. It's a thrilling storyline, with huge stakes, and it almost feels like it would've been better served as the A-plot. I do like the idea of having these missions play out as the backdrop of some more specific, character-related crisis, but c'mon: This is an entire planet we're talking about.

This does lead to one of the episode's better scenes, a scene that, once again, only really works because of the quality of the actors involved. Picard begs Frewer to tell him which choice to make, and Frewer keeps dodging the question. It shouldn't be that engaging, because odds are you've realized by now that Frewer isn't who he says he is, and that the real reason he can't tell Picard what to do is because he simply doesn't know. That makes all of Picard's debate tactics moot, but Patrick Stewart is so good at sincerity and Frewer is so good at responding to that sincerity that it's all pretty enjoyable. And the finale, when Frewer finally explains who he really is to a Data he presumes is at his mercy, is a relief. I suppose it's somewhat hardcore that Picard lets the time machine vanish, trapping Frewer in their present, but really, he killed a guy. Now he's going to get stuck in a cushy Federation prison and talk about the past with scientists, and really, how are they ever going to build a case against him? All the evidence is gone. And it didn't sound like his life in the past... in New Jersey... was all that wonderful to begin with.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- It looked like one of the pieces of *Enterprise* tech that Frewer was trying to steal was a Klingon blade. Not really sure how impressive that would be to "invent."
- I guess Troi is like an emotional barometer. If she's tense, at some point, someone will do something bad.
- "Yes, it would be. It would be quite a shame." I love Stewart's reading of this line.

"New Ground"

Or The One Where Worf Learns There's More To Being A Father Than Yelling

Here's another episode where we have a B-Plot I cared more about than the main storyline. A scientist develops a wave of energy that might supplant warp drives as the primary mode of interstellar travel? That's cool. Worf tries to bond with his irritating, boring son? Significantly less cool. It's not that I don't see a place on the show for the former storyline. Worf is cool, and any excuse to give Michael Dorn more to do than simply glower and/or be humiliated is at least a step in the right direction. And given how things ended when we first met Alexander (his mom, Worf's wife, murdered, Worf gone on a vengeance killing, and the boy shuttled off to live with Worf's adoptive parents), well, it stood to reason we'd probably see him again at some point. There's too much potential for awkward drama there for any long-running show to ignore it for long. Besides, now that Worf has largely given up on the Klingon Empire, we've got to find some way to give him storylines. It's not like he can start dating, right?

As always, there's potential here, although I'll admit it's not mind-blowing. In order to make this work, Alexander would have to be interesting. You'd need an exceptionally talented child actor, and writers who really understood how kids worked. (Or at least understood how to present kids on TV in a way that didn't make you want to speed-dial Pennywise the Clown.) Brian Bonsall isn't going to set the world on fire here; his range runs from shrill to

sulking, with occasional, unconvincing stabs at sincerity. But it's hard to blame him, because, for one thing, he's all of 11 years old here, but for another, Alexander as a character is already annoying even before the first line-reading. He's not someone with a personality; he's a plot complication that Worf has to find some way to overcome. Which makes it harder to sympathize with the boy, even when his situation is inherently sympathetic. He's making life difficult for one of my favorite characters, and given his connection to that character, I know he'll have to be dealt with.

Man, that B-plot, though, that was cool, right? For once, I found it very easy to identify with Geordi; his geeky excitement over what was about to take place, and his difficulty in finding anyone that shared that excitement, was quite charming. Even better than in "Matter of Time," the threat here developed organically from one point to the next. The first test is set up, the *Enterprise* tracks the wave, the wave is initially successful but then becomes unstable, destroying the test craft that tried to ride it. Then, because the wave is travelling at warp speeds, and because... Hm. Well, it's actually a little tricky to establish why they wouldn't've tried to aim the test wave in a direction that didn't stand the risk of destroying a colony somewhere if things went wrong. Obviously, warp speeds would mean the wave could travel tremendous distances, so it would be difficult to find a direction that wouldn't ever come up against *something*. Although space is pretty big. I guess the issue is that the wave increases in size over time? Anyway, it made enough sense at the time. The experiment goes wrong, the wave is very dangerous, and that's part of the reason why Geordi and his team are observing; because when things go wrong, it's nice to have a big starship around to fix them.

All of this was a little dry, maybe, but it didn't have to be. And while I understand the attempt to create more personal story for our regular characters, it seems weird to be equally invested in whether or not Worf can make friends with his son and whether or not someone can successfully invent a new mode of warp speed travel. This imbalance was even more obvious in "Matter," actually, where the entire fate of planet hangs in the balance while we watch comic relief get up in everybody's business. Honestly, it would even be a problem if Worf and Alexander's problems were more entertaining to watch, because I like the idea that the *Enterprise* is always flying around doing this crazy, mind-melting crap, while its crew-members squabble or work through personal issues. It's a world-building tool, because when no one seems that surprised when potential catastrophes arise, it gives you the sense that these people encounter danger quite often, and have worked through it countless times before.

But yes, Alexander's issues are not the most engaging to focus on. Worf's mom shows up with the kid in tow (completely by surprise, I might add), and while Worf initially assumes it's just for a visit, Mom soon breaks the hard truth: She and Worf's father are too old to handle a Klingon child, and Alexander is, well, a bit of a handful. This is reasonable enough. We're told again and again how difficult Klingon kids are to raise, and it hardly seems fair that Worf's parents get stuck with the hassle, even if they were initially amenable to the idea. Really, it's not fair for anybody, not for the kid, who has been run around the galaxy his whole life, or, for that matter, for Worf himself, who never even knew he had a child until about a day before Alexander's mom was killed. Difficult situations in which no one is entirely to blame are the life-blood of great drama, and while it would be easy to say Worf has just been a negligent parent (and to some extent, he has), really, he's not a selfish man or an immature one. He's just in over his head.

Alexander himself doesn't make matters any easier. He acts up in class, he lies, he even tries to steal a dinosaur model (I think I actually did this once when I was seven or so). All because he's so messed up inside since his dad abandoned him and his mom died, and everybody's just a big old jerk. It's funny; we've been told many times throughout the franchise how difficult Klingon children are to raise, but while Alexander certainly presents his share of problems, there's nothing about his behavior here that wouldn't suit a human child of roughly the same age and circumstances equally well. I suppose you could say that's one way of showing how some kinds of problems are universal across intelligent species, but it's also something of a let-down. Maybe Klingons don't become really

difficult till they hit puberty, but it would be nice if this particular Klingon wasn't so safe in his rebellion. His new teacher on the *Enterprise* is terribly upset about his actions (to be honest, this lady looks like she's been terribly upset for years; the pained, sighing expression her face must've stuck there the first time somebody tried to eat paste in her presence), but if this is the worst they have to deal with on the ship, well, child-rearing has come a long way over the years.

Worf makes all the expected bone-headed moves. He gets angry, and he tries to use the logic of honor to reason with the boy, which goes about as well as you'd expect. Dorn does a lot of solid work here, and, to give the episode its due, the writing does a good job of admitting Worf's culpability in what's going on without ever making the mistake of blaming him. I call them "bone-headed moves," but there's a certain sense in appealing to Alexander's sense of honor; giving him something to strive for in his behavior, as opposed to simply lecturing him for his mistakes, is a constructive solution, even if it isn't the entire solution. Troi gets involved, as is her wont. There's something almost charming in the desperate way she latches on to anyone in emotional crisis. "I'm useful!" her eyes scream. And she helps point Worf in the right direction, explaining that Alexander probably feels abandoned, and that maybe sending him off to Klingon school isn't the best way to reduce that feeling.

Then everything resolves in one of those irritatingly convenient calamities that force everyone involved to rethink their priorities. The warp drive causes some problems on the *Enterprise*, and Alexander gets trapped in one of the cargo bay type rooms because it has cool animals in it, and Worf has to go save him. In doing so, Worf proves he's a bad-ass (he lifts a beam which is probably supposed to be totally heavy!), and he learns how much he cares about his son and how important it is to keep Alexander close at hand. I would be more worried about this if I thought we were going to see Alexander regularly, but I have a sneaking suspicion he'll be background noise for the most part. I mean, remember Ensign Ro? I almost didn't. Like "Matter," "New Ground" raises some interesting points, but it doesn't have quite the knack of delivering on them.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- I think I used "annoying" or variations on that word at least six times in my notes. Really, I respect the idea here more than the idea behind "Matter," but at least Frewer was occasionally amusing. Alexander is just a chore.

Next week: We take a look at "Hero Worship" and "Violations."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Hero Worship"/"Violations"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[3/24/11 10:00AM](#)

"Hero Worship"

Or The One Where Pinocchio Dreams Of Being A Real Live Robot

Someone mentioned in the comments a week or two ago (take a bow, person whose name I am too lazy to go back and find) that season five of *TNG* was the season of the child guest star. This is, I'm really hoping, an exaggeration. But we've had more kids in this season so far than we've seen in the entire series, seems like, and I'd be lying if I said I was pleased about this. Kids are a drag, because children on TV shows are hardly ever compelling characters; they exist primarily as complications for the *real* characters, irritating amalgamations of need and irresponsibility. Or else they're merely symbols, as in "Hero Worship." Given his circumstances, it's not surprising that Timothy, sole survivor of the doomed ship *Vico*, isn't allowed a tremendous amount of specific personality. We're interested in him as a representative of grief, and while the manner in which he deals with that grief is distinctive, it develops in a way that doesn't tell us much about Timothy himself.

Thankfully, "Worship" is interesting enough, and deft enough, that Timothy never really becomes a liability. He's never quite as compelling as the show's best guest stars, but he's not the bland irritant that Alexander was, because he's giving very clear motivations throughout the episode. The premise sounds, well, wince-inducing: A young boy deals with a tragedy by copying Data's mannerisms. There's something very twee in that idea, no matter how thoroughly grief could anchor it; it's not the sort of thing you can imagine supporting an entire episode, and it also calls to mind a lot of cringe-worthy humor. I'm showing my cynical side here, but having a 12-year-old regurgitate Data's lines and mimic his movements sounds like the sort of thing that would bring out the worst in *TNG*, all sappy cuteness and leaden jokes. And yet, for the most part, "Worship" works, not the least because the plot summary, while accurate, doesn't really give you a good feel for what's going on here.

Our set-up: the *Enterprise* comes to the aid of the *Vico*, a science ship that went missing in a dark cluster. Unfortunately, the *Vico* is beyond saving. Some force has nearly destroyed the ship, and a quick sensor scan reveals no life forms aboard. But when Data, Riker, and Geordi beam over, they find a boy trapped under some sensor-blocking rubble. The rubble is precariously balanced, and in order to rescue the kid, Data has to put himself and the boy at some risk. The rescue succeeds, and everyone is beamed back safely to the *Enterprise*. At which point the boy, Timothy, has to come to terms with the fact that his parents, and everyone he knew on board the *Vico*, are dead.

That's fairly brutal, and the episode gets a lot of points for dealing with Timothy's emotional trauma as seriously as it does. (An aside: I'm assuming that, once Data rescues Timothy, the ensuing collapse prevents any further exploration for the ship. Or else they'd already seen all the rooms they could check. Because if there was material on board that could block the sensors, I'd want to be sure I'd checked for anybody else the computer might've missed.) (Second aside: A quick check on Memory Alpha indicates the hull collapsed after Data moved a beam. Fair enough!) *TNG* is in some ways a relentlessly optimistic show, but it's also equally willing to deal as directly as possible with misery and loss, which arguably makes the the positivity of the best episodes more resonant. We know the cost of looking forward. So here we have an episode that begins by dealing head on with something that's going to be impossible to magical resolve. Sure, if Q had popped in and decided to bring Timothy's parents to life in some non-monkey-paw-flavored fashion, that would have fixed everything, but it also would have been a tremendous cheat. Which means much of this hour is given over to someone trying to cope with a situation that is impossible to cope with in the time we spend with him.

It's a long-running joke that most shows go to inordinate lengths to make sure their conflicts are resolved before the end credits. This has changed in the era of increased serialization, when an audience's emotional commitment to the characters is heightened by a sense of continuity between episodes; we don't necessarily need to have every plot point referenced every week, but when a crisis occurs, the echoes of that crisis can linger for an entire season. It used to be, though, that when an episode was over, it was over. Neatness required that all dangled threads be neatly clipped before a final tag sent everyone home laughing. But sometimes shows chose to make things slightly messy and refused to make sure all the good people were happy and the bad people were punished. In a way, that's more unsettling than letting episodes directly comment on each other, because it means that whatever happened can't ever really be fixed. What's done is done, and those hanging, awkward moments won't ever build to any sort of catharsis.

"Worship" goes for this somewhat open approach in regards to Timothy. It's not utterly bleak, and there's more than a little hope for the future, but it allows for the fact that mourning, especially when its for close loved ones, isn't a process with an immediate resolution. But I'm getting ahead of myself here, as is my general tendency. "Worship" has some problems. While Troi acquits herself very well throughout the episode, there's a rushed quality to some of the initial conversations with Timothy that didn't quite work for me. This may be exposing a personal prejudice, as I tend to get irritated when people are overly aggressive when trying to ensure my well-being. But seemingly hours after beaming aboard the *Enterprise*, Timothy has been placed into on-board schooling (which seems to be designed for kindergarteners), and when he doesn't want to participate in class activities, the teacher acts like the poor kid just pulled out a switchblade. (This marks our second episode in a row with agonized teachers. Is this what Starfleet does with its emotionally unstable cadets?)

It's understandable that Troi would want to provide Timothy with companionship during the initial stages of grief; he's alone on the ship (and god, how awful would *that* be?), and just leaving him in his quarters to fend for himself isn't an option. But the school isn't the right context, and it's a relief when Troi, recognizing how much Timothy attaches himself to Data, encourages Data to spend more time with the kid. Timothy learns that Data doesn't feel emotions, so, logically, he decides to pretend he's an android, too. (As always, the ages seem a little odd here. This seems like the sort of game a younger child would try. But he did lose his parents, and it's not like he's dressing up

like a giant bat.) So then we get some of those awkward comedy scenes I'd been so dreading, and at first, everything seems to be going off the rails, but then it... doesn't.

I've been puzzling over that ever since I watched the episode, and I think what makes this work is that no one ever acts as though Timothy's behavior is a *bad* thing. Troi doesn't freak out and demand Data stop spending time with Timothy, and there's no big moment when the boy is forced by our heroes to come to terms with his humanity. In fact, Troi recognizes Timothy's act as a good sign, as he's taking steps to re-connect with the world, even if those steps are unnatural and, let's face it, pretty damn weird. This saves the episode. Instead of creating fake tension (Oh no! Is Timothy going craaaazy?), "Worship" just allows the drama to progress naturally. Data and Timothy's scenes together aren't perfect, but they aren't unbearable, either, and their best exchanges have a gentle, melancholy beauty to them. Last week, I criticized the crew of the *Enterprise* for being overly accepting, but when it works, that acceptance is one of *TNG*'s greatest strengths. It works here.

The episode has a secondary plotline: There's some mystery as to how the *Vico* was destroyed, and Picard keeps the *Enterprise* in the cluster to try and figure out what went wrong. Turns out there's some harmonic resonance that essentially turns the ship shield's against itself. Timothy, who initially blames himself for the disaster, helps Data save the day by remembering what happened right before everything went to hell the last time, so we get the nice pay-off of their friendship (and Troi and the others willingness to trust that friendship) saving everyone's lives and Timothy getting to work through his guilt in the best way possible. In the end, he's still not quite ready to join the other children in a rousing chorus of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" (who could blame him?), but he's on his way to recovering. "Worship" is a little too awkward in some spots and a little too smooth in others, but overall, it's a solid, affecting look how we try and rebuild ourselves after our lives fall apart and how no matter how hard we try, the architecture of our hearts remains in place.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Really, my biggest issue here, what keeps this from getting into "A-/A" territory, is that Timothy's initial reaction to his situation never rings quite true. *TNG* has a sort of dampening affect on raw emotions, and while great actors can get around that (like Patrick Stewart in "Family"), Joshua Harris doesn't really have the experience. While we understand logically why Timothy does what he does, it would make a huge difference if his circumstances had been more emotionally affecting than just a generic idea.
- According to Memory Alpha, the cast and crew learned about Roddenberry's death while filming this episode.
- Dear lord, school on a starship is painfully dull.

"Violations"

Or *The One With Mind Rape*

This isn't the first time I've written about this episode. A couple years ago, back when I was doing reviews of the original *Trek*, the A.V. Club did an Inventory called ["Space-racism is bad: And 17 other not-so-subtle lessons learned from *Star Trek*."](#) I contributed a few entries. Here's what I wrote about "Violations" back then:

"Genre storytelling is a great way to deal with touchy subjects through the veneer of fiction. By providing the audience with distance from a difficult issue, it allows them to view things more objectively, and maybe find a new perspective on things. Or else it turns something bad into, well, kind of a joke. 'Violations' sits on the middle of the line—like most episodes of *Next Generation*, it's well-meaning and generally effective, but when the metaphor becomes literal by the end, it turns into shrill moralizing that makes the whole 'cloaked in sci-fi imagery' angle seem

largely pointless. The *Enterprise* is transporting three Ullians on their trip to create a kind of personal history of the galaxy. Using their psychic gifts, the Ullians are able to probe minds of their subjects, bringing previously lost memories into sharp focus. It's all pleasant and soothing, until one of the Ullian takes a shine to Deanna Troi and forces himself into her brain. It's a mental rape standing for a physical one, and creepy as that is, the metaphor is so direct as to be hardly a metaphor at all. Much like Willow's much hated 'magic addiction' on *Buffy*, it's less a clever way to make a point than it is an obvious lack of nerve in dealing with something that would've been far more effective had it been handled more directly."

Not my best work, I think. I was still getting the hang of Inventory entries (you can tell which ones in the list are mine because nearly all of them are unnecessarily long), so I had to over-explain everything, and "Violations" was probably the weakest of the bunch, because I wasn't sure I entirely agreed that it belonged on the list. It's certainly heavy-handed, and I suppose the dialogue at the end of the episode (which helpfully points out that this was about rape, in case anyone missed that) is clunky and needless. It's not like anyone watching this would come away with the idea that *TNG* was pro-mind-rape. But "shrill" seems a bit much, and I'm not sure this is really about "an obvious lack of nerve." I can't really imagine an episode of *TNG* that had an actual physical sexual assault, but I don't think it would work very well. Partly because of that lack of rawness I was talking about earlier, but even more because, well, this is a fun, genial sci-fi adventure show. It has its dark moments, but I'm not sure we really need to get into *Starfleet: Special Victims Unit* territory.

"Violations" does try to be about as creepy as it possibly can be without getting explicit, and the results are uncomfortable and not necessarily in a good way. The dream sequences that Jev, a telepath who can't keep his brain in his skull, forces on Troi, Riker, and Crusher, are effectively unsettling, and the core idea here is certainly frightening. And hey, any episode that has Geordi and Data teaming up to solve a mystery can't be all bad. But there's a weird, sort of exploitative vibe here that throws everything off. *TNG* is not an exploitive show by any stretch; its idea of tawdry is Marina Sirtis' plunging neckline. Which is ridiculous, don't get me wrong, but we're not exactly in Joe D'Amato territory here. And yet "Violations" keeps trying to be tasteful about a subject that is inherently distasteful, which means it has a lot of nibbling but no real bite.

Of course, questions of tone aside, there's the fact that we spend much of this episode waiting for the heroes to catch up with what should be obvious from the cold open. I can sometimes over-criticize this show for what I perceive as disappointing predictability, but there really isn't any effort at all to hide what's happening here. We meet the Ullians and see them at work (Hi, Keiko!), and a few scenes later, Troi gets assaulted in her room by a memory of her and Riker that quickly turns sour. Now, it's not hard to guess that the Ullians are involved, as Troi's woes are clearly telepathically induced, but the episode makes sure we know exactly which one of the three aliens is responsible; not only have we had ample time to see Jev looking suspicious and not only is he the last person to speak with Troi before the attack, but he actually appears in her nightmare, taking Riker's place. He appears in Riker's vision too, as well as in Crusher's. All three fall into comas immediately after the attack, and when Troi wakes up, she can't remember anything, but we can.

The episode does try and pull a fast one by having Jev probe Troi's memory and replace her visions of him with visions of his father. While there's no real concern that Jev will get away with his crimes (*TNG* is willing to dabble in ambiguous endings but not quite "rapist gets away free while innocent man burns" ambiguous), it's *something*. Like I said, I harp on predictability a lot here, but the honest truth is, I don't mind being able to figure out where a story is headed. Unless there's some awful twist coming, it can be just as fun to feel clever and observant as it is to be shocked. So really, the issue here isn't that you know who's guilty. It's more that there really isn't much else to know beyond that. Jev is screwed up and likes to mess with people's minds in horrible ways. So he does that a couple times (presumably the first time because he's into Troi, and then on because he's trying to target people he suspects are a threat), and then they catch him, because he's not all that smart. The end.

As for how well this works as a metaphor for actual sexual assault, it's fairly weak. Yes, Troi and the others surely feel invaded after this, and the idea of someone who could just rifle through your brain and force his way into one of your memories is a painful one. But rape is far more damaging than a show like this would be capable of showing. Physical assault leaves wounds, scars. It's messy and ugly, and those aren't concepts that *TNG* really does well with. The victims in "Violations" will probably undergo some therapy after this, but Troi wakes up with no memory at all of what happened. It's no better or worse than half a dozen other screwed up things that the heroes of this show have had to deal with, but the difference is, getting knocked up by Tinkerbell doesn't have a real world equivalent. By explicitly using the word "rape" in its closing moments, this episode is trying to make emotional connections it simply can't support.

For all of that, there are enjoyable moments here. The dream sequences aren't bad; I especially liked the last one, in which Jev forces Beverly to relive identifying her husband's body with a young Captain Picard. (Picard has hair!) And like I said, it's fun watching Geordi and Data piece things together. Even when we know where they'll end up, there's something to be said for seeing how everything fits. And there's a lovely scene with Riker talking to the unconscious Troi, with some really nice acting from Frakes. Generally speaking, though, this one was a misfire. And once again, poor Troi got to bear the brunt of it. Not only is she assaulted twice, but she isn't even allowed the dignity of coming to her own defense. Clunky writing or no, I wasn't that far off in my original assessment.

Grade: C+

Stray Observations:

- Haven't busted out the C in a while. My reasoning: A "B-" ep would indicate a workable premise, done poorly. I'm open to argument, but I just don't feel like the core concept here could ever have worked, unless it was on a different show. And even then.
- Out of Context Theater Presents: "Klingons do not allow themselves to be... probed."
- Next week, we put on our monocles for "The Masterpiece Society," and our thinking caps for "Conundrum."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Masterpiece Society"/"Conundrum"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[3/31/11 10:00AM](#)

"The Masterpiece Society"

Or The One Where Sir Francis Galton Was Right

I'm not sure human beings are designed to appreciate Utopia. At least, not the sort of Utopia we can create ourselves. It always bothers me in *The Matrix* when Agent Smith talks about people "rejecting" a perfect world. I think we flatter ourselves by pretending that we're too driven and clever to be satisfied with a computer generated heaven; I doubt it would be that difficult to provide us with some simulacrum that would satisfy our pleasure centers and scratch whatever itch we have to achieve. But the machines would have to be the ones in charge. A human-run Utopia, to me, isn't really possible, because it would require every person involved to always be acting with the best interests of everyone else in mind. Individual people can, by turns, be noble, sacrificing, and trustworthy. They can also be selfish, short-sighted, and cruel. While it would be nice to believe that an environment without negative influences would prevent these characteristics from arising, I'm not sure I believe it.

Of course, "The Masterpiece Society" tries to make a case otherwise, but then, that's not really surprising coming from *TNG*. This has always been a show built on idealism, as much as any show can be. Admittedly, life can't be perfect for the crew of the *Enterprise* and the universe they inhabit, because then we'd have no drama, and that would make for a fairly boring series. But *TNG* delivers us a version of the future in which nearly all our current major crises have been resolved, where, so far as we can tell, there's no class struggle, no poverty, and no discrimination of any kind. Sure, it's not exact, and maybe I'm being too cynical by not believing humanity would be capable of getting even this much perfection out of its government. But I'm almost reflexively more interested in the show when it tries to show the impossibilities of ever maintaining a life of complete harmony when dealing with

multiple cultures over multiple worlds. Life is not designed to ever be perfectly satisfied, at least not for very long; perfect satisfaction is perfect rest, and perfect rest is death.

"Society" doesn't quite confirm this; before the *Enterprise* shows up, the group of bred and perfect humans living in isolation on Moab IV seem to be in perfect harmony, and it's only the reminder that there are other worlds than these that gets everybody riled up. In fact, large parts of "Society" are dedicated to giving as true a sense of loss as possible to the community's dissolution. But that society is by far the least interesting element here. It's as blandly generic as nearly all attempts to portray group perfection are (while I don't agree with Agent Smith that humans would reject an ideal environment, I do think it makes for incredibly boring fiction), because the ideas here are more important than the individuals. We're dealing with the Prime Directive again, and the tricky ground our heroes walk on whenever they interact with strangers, even if they aren't violating their own rules, even when they have the best of intentions. Also we're dealing with Troi apparently failing in love with yet another stranger within five minutes of meeting him, but that's a bit less heady.

Speaking of heady, I should probably get to the plot here: The *Enterprise* is following a core fragment of a neutron star, to study it and to warn any inhabited planets it might disrupt. To the crew members' surprise, they discover a colony of humans on Moab IV, a supposedly uninhabited planet in the Moab Sector, but when they contact the society to warn them of what's coming, and to offer their assistance in evacuating the locals, they're met with polite, but firm, dismissal. Aaron Conor, the colony's leader, explains that they are a society designed to live in perfect balance with their environment and each other, and that any change, no matter how slight, would result in chaos. But that core fragment isn't something you can exactly ignore, and Conor is so impressed by the idea of matter-energy transport (ie, the transporter magic we've been enjoying since the original series first debuted) that he invites a few crew-members down from the ship to talk things over with the society's scientists.

Once Riker, Troi, and Geordi arrive, Conor explains the situation a bit more clearly. He and the rest of his people are the result of a centuries old selective breeding process which... yeah, that's right. "Selective breeding." Which means Eugenics, and while there are rational ways to discuss this (and the episode does its best to stick to those ways, with some exceptions), it's hard not to be uncomfortable at how, well, *happy* everybody here is that they were designed at birth to fit specific roles. "Masterpiece" largely gets around the moral dilemma by making sure the people who initiated this colony are all long dead; this is the only life Conor and the others have known, and no one objects to it. One of the primary arguments against eugenics is that it takes away the individual's right to procreate and lets a select group decide which qualities are "desirable" and which are "undesirable" to reproduce. Here, that argument is somewhat moot, since it doesn't seem like there are any "undesirable" traits left to "purge." Apart from blindness or other physical defects, I guess.

Still, it's a queasy concept, and the more I think about this episode, the more surprised I am that it asks us to take that concept at face value. Much of the dramatic weight here comes from the idea that the chaos the Moabians are thrown into is as much a bad thing as it is a good one, and that means believing that something beautiful and irreplaceable is lost once Troi and Geordi and the others work their inadvertent influence. This is a bit like "The Apple" from the original series, but here, instead of Kirk deciding it's his duty to destroy Eden, Picard and Troi are distraught over what's happening, and regret their interference even while understanding it was inevitable. Sure, there are some important differences: the natives in "Apple" were essentially kept in thrall to a super computer, while the folks in "Society" are as autonomous as their biology and circumstance allow. But there's still that sense of innocence being lost.

Really, though, we don't see anything here that seems all that singular. We're told over and over again how balanced the group's life is, how everyone fits exactly where they belong, but for the little time the episode spends on the planet, there's no evidence of anything much better than what we've come to expect in the Federation. After

spending four-plus seasons being told how wonderful the future will be for humanity, to stumble across a small pocket of humans who are supposedly living even better lives is a stretch to buy into. No one experiences any career doubt? Well, that's nice, but the advancements we see on the planet aren't particularly significant, largely because (as Geordi points out) advancement comes out of a response to crisis. If everything's fine, people might putter about a bit, but there's no real reason for them to push outward. I mean, these are supposedly the pinnacles of human mental ability, bred to achieve ultimate potential, but they're astonished by technology that existed in the original *Star Trek*. These folks have stagnated.

I suppose you could make an argument that progress isn't necessarily the pinnacle of human existence and that the Moabians have some kind of inner peace going that outstrips a "normal" life, but that's more implied than explained here. One of the things I enjoy about *TNG* this far into its run is that when it fails, it nearly always fails because it's trying to work with too many ideas at once. (Even "Violations," miserable though it was, had ambitions.)

"Masterpiece" raises a lot of questions, but it doesn't really do justice to any of them. The first, most obvious problem, is that we aren't given much of a reason to regret the colony's woes. Judging by Troi and Picard's response, there should be a sense of loss here, but it mostly just seems like a bunch of bland people are being forced to be a little less bland. (Apart from Martin, the shouting guy, who is really unhappy about all of this.) People leave home all the time.

It's different here, though, we're told over and over, because the community is so well designed that it can't bear the loss of a few of its members. That seems like a bit of design flaw to me. On the one hand, it does ensure that everyone feels valued, which is one of the main factors in social disenfranchisement. But on the other, there's too much telling here, and not really a sense of what Conor means when he says the loss of Hannah (a scientist who becomes infatuated with the possibilities the *Enterprise* represents) and the others will wreck the place. Does he mean general dissatisfaction? Food shortages? Riots? Will someone else have to learn how to play the piano? We need stakes here, in order to make the conflict actually feel two-sided. Our natural impulse is to side with the folks who want to leave, because they want to ride in a space ship, and because whenever we see someone being potentially held against their will, unless that someone is a bad person, we want them to escape. If there'd been a clearer sense of the problems that would arise when Hannah's people got their wish or the dangers that awaited them, Conor's point would be easier to sympathize with.

As it is, he just comes off as whiny. As does Troi, with her horrible guilt over her three-day infatuation or however long that lasts. She blames herself for getting involved with Conor, when their romance is about as passionate and exciting as a Sesame Street Valentines card. Picard is equally distressed over what's happened, although at least he seems to understand that the change is most likely inevitable at this point. Out of our regular cast, only Geordi seems truly bothered by what the society represents, and what their genetic manipulations and restrictions truly mean. In a bizarre capper, Riker and Picard discuss what happened, and Picard refers to the Prime Directive, and how events of the episode reminded him of the importance of that restriction. Riker says, "But they were human," which is an odd, uncomfortable point to make; if there were human cultures on other planets which existed independently of our own, wouldn't they fail under the same rules? And then Picard once again bemoans the Moabians' dissolution. For once, the captain's usually unshakable moral authority is curiously absent. There was a nice house, and then some people left it, and if there's a loss in that, the gain far exceeds the cost. If Utopia requires you to spend your life indoors, I, frankly, don't see much use in it.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- Okay, Hannah's "multi-phase tractor beam" was very clever. Clearly, these are smart people; they just haven't had a reason to be smart.
- I also liked how Geordi and Hannah's combined efforts were able to move the neutron fragment, and I also liked how Hannah claims there's a biosphere breach when there isn't one. I wish the episode had focused more on her growing awareness than on Conor's polite complaints.

"Conundrum"

Or The One Where Troi Beats Data At Chess, And Everyone Is So Embarrassed They Forget Everything

Seriously, what the hell was that? "Chess is a game of intuition" my ass. Data doesn't have emotions! She can't read what he's planning, and it's not like you can "feel" your way to victory playing against a computer. I'm all for Troi showing greater competence, but this is absurd. It would work if it wasn't Data; she made a bet that he'd have to make a drink for her if she won, but since Data would obviously make her a drink either way, it would've made just as much sense to show her sparring off against, I dunno, Worf. (Of course, then we wouldn't get the "Data is a bartender" joke, which isn't a terrible gag, so... I dunno.)

Once we're past that initial unpleasantness, however, "Conundrum" settles into my favorite kind of episode, the sci-fi puzzle: Something inexplicable happens, our heroes struggle to explic it, and a crisis arises that makes the explanation not just compelling but mandatory. Here, the problem is this: The *Enterprise* encounters a strange ship. It ignores attempts at communication, and then scans the *Enterprise* with a green light that first glitches out Data, then ultimately wipes out the memory of everyone on board. Not the complete memory: The crew still remember how to perform their jobs, even if they're not longer sure exactly what those jobs are. But all personal knowledge is gone, including names, friendships, and even the most fundamental understanding of their purpose onboard a starship. Everyone's so confused, in fact, that nobody realizes they have a special guest among their midst, a new bridge officer named MacDuff who Dawns his way aboard and acts like he belongs there.

MacDuff's unremarked upon appearance is one of the best parts of "Conundrum," and while his presence here is significantly less impressive than what *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* did with Buffy's little sister (in what was essentially a live-action ret-con), there's that same casual boldness that marked Dawn's debut. Actually, even Dawn was underlined a bit when she showed up. MacDuff is in the background, and even as someone who's watched every episode of the show this far, I still had a brief moment of doubt. I knew he wasn't a regular, but it was possible that he was one of the rotating helmsmen, and I'd just missed him before. Except, well, helmsman don't wear red uniforms on this show. Which means that whatever was going on, the reason for it was right there in front of us.

Not only does MacDuff's integration go unremarked upon, but "Conundrum" does a great job of letting us know what he's trying to accomplish without ever having him come out and state it directly. We don't have a scene where he communicates with home base or where he tells Data his secrets before turning the android off (presumably laughing malevolently while doing so), or any one of half a dozen clearer ways of making sure everyone in the audience realized what was going on. Yes, when he starts urging Worf to mutiny, it's hard to ignore what his true intentions are, but those scenes are still perfectly in character. There's no hand-holding here, and while the episode isn't the most complex piece of writing ever, it is worth noting just how much this slight gesture of faith in the audience helps to make the rest of the story work better.

The "blank slate" plotline is a familiar one to genre fans; it's been used many, many times before (*Buffy's* "Tabula Rasa," *Supernatural's* "It's a Terrible Life," *Angel's* "Spin the Bottle," pretty much all of *Dollhouse*) and there's something fun about seeing it in action with a new group of characters, especially characters we know as well as we do the *TNG* ensemble. It's a chance to re-examine established relationships, to remind us why we like these people and what they mean together. It's also a great way to reinforce basic truths. One of the best subplots here is how

Worf, stripped of his knowledge of his place on the ship, assumes the position of command. It makes a limited sort of sense (although it would mean discounting the fact that nearly everyone else aboard the *Enterprise* is human, but then, he has no way of knowing this, and besides, if he's the only Klingon on-board, he must be a pretty spectacular Klingon), and it fits in with what we know about Worf and his people. This could've turned unpleasant if Picard and Worf had squared off, but Picard holds back, simply doing his best to influence the new "captain's" decisions in a way that indicates he's the one more fit for the big chair. When the bridge crew finally learn their real roles, Worf steps aside and apologizes for his presumption, and that's basically that. Sure, there's some tension when MacDuff tries to get Worf on his side, but there's no real conflict there; the Picard and Worf relationship makes too much sense to pretend otherwise.

That low-key approach could destroy tension, but I actually found it to be one of the most entertaining aspects of "Conundrum." Plenty of times when a show uses this trope, it's a way to force characters in difficult circumstances to be friendly with each other again. A memory wipe clears away the drama, and it also offers an excuse for the writers to try and recapture their initial conceptions of each cast-member, before history and development took hold. Here, though, everybody acts roughly the same way they always act. Worf tries to take charge, and Riker and Ensign Ro hook up, but neither of these events are particularly shocking. (Apart from the fact that I can't remember the last time two crew members slept together on the show.) Picard is reasonable and a good leader, Geordi is smart, Dr. Crusher is a doctor, and so on. It's not the most exciting way to handle the concept, but there's something to be said for not forcing conflict where there doesn't need to be any. There aren't any lingering issues built up between our heroes, apart from, apparently, Riker and Ro's simmering sexuality. Trying to pretend there were would've been embarrassing.

Admittedly, sometimes, "Conundrum" is a little too laid-back for its own good. Once everyone realizes the basic scope of the problem, they get to work trying to get as much information out of their computer banks as they can. This leads to everybody finding out what their job is, and also learning that they are part of the United Federation of Planets, and that the Federation is currently at war with the Lysian Alliance and that the Lysians apparently have a weapon that can wipe memories. Which gives us the real crisis of the episode: Can Picard and the others realize they've been duped in time to avoid destroying a space station in the name of a made up war? The answer being, mostly, yeah. Sure, the *Enterprise* destroys one ship, but Picard comes to his senses before they take out the command center, and while it's a well done sequence, it's not a particularly surprising resolution.

"Conundrum" generally works. It benefits from breaking outside the mold a bit, structurally, since much of the running time is given over character fumbling and trying to regain old patterns. But even that fumbling isn't that intense; the biggest change-up here is Worf, and his ascension to the throne lasts only a few scenes. (Fun as it is, Riker and Ro's hook-up doesn't really shake the foundations of *TNG*. As Ro points out herself, the lack of context probably just allowed them to do what they'd really wanted to do all along. As movies and TV have taught us, any couple who bickers that intensely is bound to end up in bed together eventually.) The episode also benefits from subtly presenting us with a storyline beneath its main action, as we, the audience, are able to put together what's happening before the ensemble does; while they're debating over who sits where, we're wondering where MacDuff is leading. It also helps that MacDuff's plan isn't a terrible one. It requires an impressive amount of energy to put together (and it's also amazing that he's able to wipe out everyone's memory about the ship, and with that degree of precision, and they still aren't winning the war?), but the fundamentals are sound.

It's too bad, though, that we never learn anything more about him. One-sided villains are fun and all, but this show often works best when it shows us a bunch of different sides at once. I would've liked to have gotten a sense of MacDuff, beyond our glimpse of his "real" self under phaser fire during the climax. More than that, though, I was a little bored by this one, despite my affection for the premise. It is possible, after all, to be too low-key, and once the basic parameters were set, the plot became a stalling mechanism until Picard finally made his decision not to fire on

the command center. While it makes sense that MacDuff would leave the crew's technical expertise intact, that also meant doing away with one of the more entertaining parts of the blank slate episode: There wasn't much danger here for our heroes, and there wasn't much sense of discovery, either. A middle of the road episode like this one can be enjoyable for its character moments and for allowing us to spend more time in this world. But it still makes me wish they'd swing for the fences more often.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- So, apparently there are gymnastics in the future.
- I guess everybody got their memories back, then? Actually, I like how this is treated so casually. Once Picard decides not to fire on the Lysians and Worf stands up to MacDuff (once again getting his ass handed to him), the journey back to who they were is essentially complete.

Next week: We try and make a "Power Play" and get into a question of "Ethics."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Power Play"/"Ethics"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[4/07/11 10:00AM](#)

Or The One Where Data Picks A Fight, But Nobody Plays Hockey

Here we are, over halfway through season five, and I'm noticing something of a slump. Now, let's contextualize this. (God, how I love that word!) When I say "slump," I don't mean that this has been a bad season, nor do I mean the show isn't capable of greatness anymore. It's not even necessarily a horrible thing. Part of the problem with rating or criticizing television is that it doesn't have to be great to be worth watching. That's not a shocking truth: Greatness is rare enough that it would be a poor life indeed if you insisted on perpetual perfection. But (and I'm blue skying a bit here, so stay with me) I think one of the reasons fans can get so upset when critics point out the flaws in the shows they love is that, for them, the world of the show is so important that the flaws are largely irrelevant. I say *TNG*'s fifth season is weaker than its third and fourth, but the momentum created by those previous seasons is strong enough that my overall enjoyment of the series hasn't really diminished yet. It's funny how that works, like the way books can have a weak ending and still be worth reading, I guess.

"Power Play" is the latest in a season largely populated by pretty-good-but-not-great episodes. It's the sort of storyline I can easily imagine the show attempting earlier in its run, and the basics of the script (alien entities take over Troi, Data, and O'Brien's bodies; a hostage situation; and a twist) aren't so spectacularly solid that they stand on their own. But while this would probably have been horrendously cheesy in the first couple of seasons, with a lot of over-acting from the villains and, well, Tasha Yar-ness, it's quite credibly enjoyable here. It's lacking that mystical "third heat" that great episodes manage; there's no particularly deep philosophizing at play, the suspense is never all that suspenseful, and the final twist is too vague to have much of an impact. And yet I never cringed watching it, and I wasn't bored. This sounds like a painfully low bar, and maybe it is, but one of the nice things about watching a

show that you've invested a considerable amount of time in is that it doesn't have to be great to be satisfying. It can just be not bad.

"Play" begins, as roughly ninety percent of *TNG* episodes seem to (seriously, while it's plot appropriate here, I can't help wondering if the writers drew the first few sentences of every script out of a hat and just replaced all the proper nouns), with the *Enterprise* checking out a distress signal. This one is emanating from a supposedly lifeless moon, where electromagnetic whirlwinds prevent the scanners from picking up adequate readings. The distress signal seems to be coming from the *USS Essex*, a Starfleet ship that disappeared over 200 years ago, but while Data is unable to pick up any life signs, Troi is convinced there's *something* on the planet worth investigating. Considering what happens next, this does seem like a terrible time for Troi to actually try and do her job, but hey, beggars and choosers and all that.

So Troi, Riker, and Data take a shuttle to the moon's surface, which, given the dangerous weather, seems like a pretty ballsy move on their part. They suffer for their daring, though, when the shuttle crashes and Riker breaks his arm and we briefly think we've gotten to the big plot for the episode: the trio, stranded on the moon, where presumably their situation becomes more dangerous, while they are unable to establish contact with the ship. But back on the *Enterprise*, O'Brien has a plan! Using transporter enhancers, he beams down to the moon's surface to save the day, just in time to get knocked unconscious along with the others by a strange cloud of energy. We get more Tinkerbell action here, as three balls of light invade Data, Troi, and O'Brien's bodies. Riker is left untouched, possibly because his arm is broken and partly because his beard renders him immune to any form of possession which isn't performed by a seductive alien lady.

Wow, this is more plot summary than I usually do. And it's not like the story is all that complicated. Yes, Troi, Data, and O'Brien are now under the control of alien entities who quickly make a concerted effort to take over the ship once they're back on board. They claim to be "survivors" of the *Essex* (Troi claims to be possessed by the *Essex's* captain, Bryce Shumar), but Picard doesn't trust them, so of course they're lying. Funny how that works, isn't it? It makes it more than a little obvious that things aren't what they seem to be, that Picard doesn't believe "Captain Bryce's" claims, but at the same time, it's gratifying that our captain catches on to the lie as quickly as he does. The Rule of Plot Efficiency (which has another, much better name than that I'm sure) dictates that any time a character on a show like this voices a suspicion, it has to be for a reason more important than a simple passing thought. So the moment Picard expresses his doubts, we know those doubts will be confirmed.

Once their clumsy attempt to take over the ship falls through, the trio of the body snatched winds up in Ten Forward, where they take everyone in the room hostage. (Guinan, apparently on the interstellar equivalent of a smoke break, is nowhere to be found. Maybe she's getting her hats done.) Now here, you'd assume, is where the real meat of the episode is; here's where the tension ratchets up and the various screws tighten. Not only are a bunch of innocent people under threat by a surprisingly efficient group of villains, but those villains show odd signs of straying under the stress of their situation, which is rarely a good sign for anyone. Faux Data keeps trying to pick a fight with Worf. Faux O'Brien remembers enough of the real O'Brien's life to recognize Keiko and their infant daughter, which fascinates him for reasons which are never entirely explained. Eventually, Picard offers to trade himself for the hostages which were injured in the initial attack, and Faux Troi agrees to the swap. So, lots of dramatic potential here.

Except no one on the *Enterprise* never seems to be in any real danger. After their first assault on the ship, the bad guys never come across as all that dangerous or smart, which is odd, because part of the reason that first assault is fun to watch is how ruthlessly the fakers behave. As soon as they're sure they won't be able to get what they want through subterfuge, Faux Data starts taking out everyone on the bridge, with Faux O'Brien happily joining in. Faux Troi even takes out Picard. Then they power through the *Enterprise*, and it's fairly exciting because for once, we

have a threat which seems intimately and legitimately threatening. I'm not saying the show suddenly turned into *The Shield* (I just imagined a *TNG* episode with Walton Goggins guest-starring, which, seriously, holy crap guys), but having psychos wandering around mid-ship doesn't happen every week. I didn't expect body count, but the element of uncertainty was, brief or no, gratifying.

Once the three take hostages, though, the tension drains away, because our heroes never seem to lose control of the situation. Beverly comes up with a way to shake the energy beings out of Troi and the others, and Geordi and Ro do their best to implement the plan, failing because apparently Ro didn't play enough video games as a child. This should increase the sense of danger; our last, best hope has been attempted, and now the villains will be angry, which means they could do anything. But they don't, and for all Brent Spiner's sneering (I think he just gets bored from playing Data all the time; thankfully, the over-acting is actually fairly effective here), one never really gets the impression that they're going to. Everything feels terribly safe, and since none of the baddies ever get much of a personality, we're left with a decently made but filler-ish hour. Faux Data is a jerk, Faux Troi has a certain professional malevolence about her, and Faux O'Brien is weirdly creepy about Keiko and the baby, but none of these initial developments ever feels like anything more than an after-thought.

That goes for the ending as well. It turns out "Bryce" was lying. The energy beings are actually convicts who've been imprisoned on the moon for ages. They destroyed the *Essex* when they tried to take it over back in the day, and now they want to use the *Enterprise* to beam their fellow prisoners off the moon. Then everyone else on the ship will get invaded and, presumably, wacky hijinks will ensue. As twists go, this is a bad choice, because instead of making the story more interesting, it takes out a potential dramatic conflict. Before, we thought the bad guys were actually former Starfleet officers, driven to madness by their incarceration on the planet. If that had been true, it would mean that Picard would have to deal both with the threat they represented and his obligations to them as, essentially, victims of circumstance. But a bunch of convicts trapped by an alien civilization? Screw 'em. They probably murdered babies or something.

So Picard and Riker are able to short circuit Faux Troi's plans, as we knew they would. There's nothing wrong with the outcome here; I know it seems like I complain sometimes about the show being too predictably safe, but I'm not asking for a body count. And there are touches here I enjoyed, like Data's apologies to Worf after he's freed of alien influence or Geordi and Ro's banter as they tried to set up the plasma beam. Like I said, *TNG* has done its homework and created a pleasant enough environment that hour-eaters like this are more a pleasant distraction than a chore. But, well, there's a reason I relied more on plot summary here than usual, and it's not because there were so many cool ideas to talk about.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- Another cool bit: Faux Data and Troi both pushing for exploration of the moon's southern region in their own ways. I wonder if the episode would've been better if the trio had managed to go incognito for just a little while longer; it almost seems like the amount of damage they manage to inflict happens too quickly.

"Ethics"

Or *The One Where Worf Sadly Never Screams*, "*Where's the rest of me?!?*"

Worf gets hit by a barrel that breaks his spinal cord, and then he wants Riker to help him commit suicide. Beverly invites a specialist aboard the *Enterprise* to help her with Worf's injuries and discovers this specialist plays a bit fast and loose when it comes to the Hippocratic Oath. So basically, this is like an episode of *House*, only instead of an acerbic, gaunt bastard scarfing pain pills and pontificating about humanity's inhumanity towards everyone, we get

Dr. Crusher acting somewhat aghast as her new friend starts dropping bodies. Worf is the PotW. Riker is Wilson, trying to be respectful of a friend while at the same time deeply worried about his friend's intentions. And everyone else is... well, all right, as a metaphor this doesn't exactly hold up. And there are plenty of medical shows which have dealt with this kind of moral crisis before. I'm just trying to stay in my wheelhouse with my comparisons here.

The point, though, is that while it has the expected sci-fi trappings (did you know that Klingons have a back-up for just about every internal organ?), "Ethics" is basically a medical drama, one that focuses more on how people deal with the philosophical quandaries that arise in some extreme cases of injury or illness, and how the pursuit of research can lead to a distinct lack of concern for the present. It has some pretty big flaws that keep it from realizing its ambitions, primarily due to the choice of primary victim and the rapidity with which one of the plotlines plays out. But it's ambitious, and it has a message, and it manages to get that message across without turning *too* heavy-handed. In short, I enjoyed "Power Play" the most out of this week's two-fer, but I appreciated "Ethics" more. At least it had ambitions.

Hm. Well, I seem to have already given you the basic plot summary, which sort of hamstrings my usual format here. And really, there isn't a lot of plot to go around. Worf's injury is kind of ridiculous (it's great watching Geordi pretend the barrel that fell on the Klingon is heavy enough to have seriously injured him, even though it's pretty obviously not), as it's both arbitrary and insulting. He isn't wounded in battle or while protecting anyone; he's just standing in a loading bay, and then something falls on him. But then, it's not like *TNG* has ever been invested in maintaining Worf's dignity when it doesn't suit the series' needs. Oh sure, he comes across as the lone paragon of virtue in the Klingon Empire, but as soon as some random alien wanders onto the bridge looking for a smack down, Worf's on his ass, looking baffled and more than a little annoyed.

Actually, "arbitrary" may not be quite the word I want here. "Contrived" is more like it. We've spent a fair amount of time on the *Enterprise* by now, and I don't remember ever having this kind of major workplace injury go down before, not unless it was part of some ship-wide malfunction or a holodeck error or whatever was driving the plot that week. Really, the only reason this happens is so Worf can lose the use of his legs for a while, and while I realize the nature of television at the time meant that this couldn't be a storyline that dragged out over multiple episodes, it still feels rushed here. And that rush just draws more attention to the silliness of it. Worf is injured, and maybe two scenes later, he's asking Riker to help him commit suicide. Maybe more time has passed on the ship than what we see, but we never get a sense of time passing, which makes Worf's desires hard to take seriously. Sure, it's convention, but suicide is a major choice, culturally dictated or no. I'd like to think Worf has come far enough that he'd at least explore his options before reaching for the knife.

Making Worf the victim here is "Ethics" biggest misstep, because it undercuts the moral questions the episode tries to raise, as well as damages a lot of the great work the show has done with Worf since its first season. Last time we had a Worf-centric episode, he was realizing how important Alexander was in his life and deciding he was willing to put the work in to raise his son right. And here he is, responding to a crisis by immediately choosing the most extreme way out, a way out that would've left Alexander alone on the *Enterprise*, once again abandoned by the only living relative he knows. (Sure, Worf asks Troi to step in and take care of the kid if he dies, but that's only *after* Worf has decided to do his best to live.) There are ways this could've been handled better: if we'd gotten a clearer sense of Worf's distress over his condition, apart from that one scene where he collapses in front of his son, say. But as is, it makes him look childish, selfish, and irresponsible, all for the sake of putting Riker in a tricky spot.

To say nothing of the fact that, given who Worf is and given the show's refusal to kill or injure any of its cast (apart from the Tasha Yar Exemption, which is only for Tasha Yar), all this drama over Worf's condition seems forced and, yes, contrived. This is a show that had its leading man captured and essentially turned into a robot zombie and still managed to find a way to bring him back. I really don't think it would suddenly cripple a secondary character,

especially not under these circumstances. Which means as soon as Dr. Russell proposes her super-risky, super-magic treatment to save Worf's spine, we know that they're going to perform the surgery eventually, whatever Beverly thinks of it, and that the surgery will be successful, however long they drag that success out. This is really the sort of storyline that needs a new character to be effective. I'm sure it would've been a bit awkward for Riker to have an old friend we've never seen before visit the *Enterprise*, only to be immediately paralyzed from the waist down, but at least then the PotW's survival would've been up in the air.

But if you can get past this (and I'll admit, it's a lot to get past), there are elements to this episode which are worth enjoying. Jonathan Frakes, who did such impressively low-key work over Troi's sick-bed in "Violations," gets another chance to show off here; maybe seeing his friends in poor health inspires him. His frustration and anger at Worf's request helps make the situation seem just a little more real; while it seems like an obvious choice to us (as Riker himself points out, respect for other cultures doesn't mean you have to *like* them, and it certainly doesn't mean you have to participate in something you find morally abhorrent), his angst over the decision at least feels legitimate. However, Picard's willingness to equivocate here shines light on an aspect of the character that's actually starting to get on my nerves of late. He's *too* eager to play the "both sides are equal" card. Generally, this speaks well of his commitment to fair play, and Patrick Stewart is nearly always able to sell his reasoning, but every once in a while, it'd be nice if he said, "To hell with this, that's just *stupid*." (Actually, he did roughly this in the Matt Frewer episode, so I guess I should've given him more credit there.)

The other decent plotline here is Beverly's increasing mistrust of Dr. Russell. It turns out the supposed expert has gotten in a fair bit of trouble for her shortcutting approach to basic research, and none of that trouble has taught her that maybe killing a bunch of patients now isn't really a resume booster, even if it does theoretically save hundreds of lives in the future. The "correct" answer here is easy enough to spot. Russell's arrogance, her dismissal of the Klingon body structure (really, what kind of idiot scientist looks at an evolved system and says, "I don't understand all of this, so I'm just going to assume it's stupid"?), her willingness to put Worf's life at risk for a surgery with a holodeck-only "37 percent success rate" is bad enough; the fact that she kills a patient on Beverly's watch makes her wrongness pretty inescapable. And yet, she does end up getting to perform her special, ultra-dangerous surgery on Worf. I guess those back-up organs means this episode gets to have its cake *and* eat it too.

I wish I liked "Ethics" more than I do, but the more I think about it, the more it leaves me cold. I do respect it for trying to make big statements about responsibility and duty and so forth, but the amount of convoluted writing that goes in to making those statements possible is frustrating and often risible. I will say, I was impressed at the big surgery, largely because of how long the episode managed to milk the idea that Worf was dead. But for the most part, this drew out all of *TNG*'s most irritating ticks: its desire to tell complicated moral stories while providing the audience with a crib sheet on how to respond, its lack of consistency with some of its central characters, and its often ridiculously mistimed idea of dramatic pacing. Just because I'm glad the show hasn't given up on ambition doesn't mean I don't wince when it keeps tripping over its own feet.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- "I want you to help me die." In a better judged episode, that would've been devastating. (Also, really, if you're going to do an assisted suicide episode, then dammit, *do* an assisted suicide episode. You don't have to follow through on the deed, but at least allow it a full hour to breathe. Or else, just have the whole episode be about medical ethics. The mix-and-match approach means both sides end up short-changed.)
- Right, so Alexander was in this episode. Well, I did like the scene where Worf gave him the ceremonial knife. It seems like a very Klingon sort of moment.

- Anybody else have *Dead Ringers* flashbacks during the surgery scene?
- Whatever my other problems, Beverly's take-down of Russell in that last scene was very satisfying. "You take shortcuts right through living tissue."

Next week: We dance with the left hand of darkness in "The Outcast" and try and pin down some "Cause and Effect."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Outcast"/"Cause And Effect"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[4/14/11 10:00AM](#)

"The Outcast"

Or The One Where Riker Gets A Reverse Crying Game. Sort of. Er, that's not really all that funny. It's actually sort of tacky, when you think about it.

I'm not a fan of "message" entertainment. And I'm not exactly sure why. I thought I had very clear reasons coming into this piece; I don't like it when someone puts making a political or ethical point ahead of storytelling, because it nearly always makes for bland stories, full of shallow characters who exist solely to espouse a certain position. The *Trek* franchise is well known for this sort of holding forth; the original series was full of broad-stroke, lecture hall foolishness, and many of those episodes were enjoyable in their way, due to *TOS*'s willingness to commit entirely to a premise, no matter how absurd. But I'd still rather watch an episode that wasn't supposed to work as a direct metaphor for some real-life situation, and that goes doubly true for *TNG*. Now, I love this *TNG*, as much in its way as I love *TOS*, but this is not a series that can pull off camp. So when it tries a message episode, it's generally pretty dire.

All of which is reasonable enough, but then something like "The Outcast" shows up, which is basically terrific throughout *and* has something to say about the real world, and I'm not sure how to respond. Because really, isn't all great writing about more than just story? Sure, there are movies or books or shows that function as pure entertainment and are all the better for it, but you can't tell me *The Godfather* is just a simple family drama, or that *2001* is just about a crazy robot and some lights and a giant space baby. Trying to apply across the board rules to art is basically a bad idea, at least if you pretend those rules won't eventually be broken by some really talented people. So let me simply say that whenever a show tries to put some kind of direct statement about political or

human rights into a plotline, it's tricky business, and you should tread lightly. Stories work best when they're character/world specific but morally generalized. But don't hold me to that.

"The Outcast" is, on one level, a treatise about how horrifying it is when a culture decides a certain portion of its population is "sick" and takes steps to punish them for being outside the norm. Specifically, it's about how the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered are often badly treated by the so-called mainstream, viewed as unhealthy aberrations that are "sick" and need to be "cured" through psychological conditioning. It's a scary, depressing, and unsettling subject, and if you'd asked me before if I thought *TNG* could handle this idea with the compassion and honesty it deserved, I don't think I would have given you a very optimistic answer. So I was pleasantly surprised here and more than a little shocked by an ending that ranks up there with one of the grimmest the show has ever done. For once, the real world connection actually adds to the drama instead of distracting from it. This feels less like a lecture and more like a cry of rage, and that's a good thing.

The *Enterprise* is working with the J'naii, a race of androgynes who've lost a ship in what turns out to be a pocket of null space. Null space is hella dangerous (actual scientific term), so Riker works with one of the J'naii, Soren, to determine the best course of action to rescue the crew of the missing ship. While they work together, eventually deciding that the only real course of action is to fly one of the shuttles into the pocket with some advanced hardware and hope for the best, the two form a strong connection. Soren is charming, intelligent, and brave, and he/she's more than a little curious about all that "he/she" stuff Riker is such an expert on. The two banter, it gradually gets more serious, and finally, Soren tells Riker that he/she has feelings for him—and that "he/she" actually identifies specifically as "she," which is a bit of a problem in J'naii culture.

Before we get into the heavy drama, it's worth noting that, right up until Soren comes clean about her crush and her particular "abnormality," this is a terribly charming episode and easily one of the show's best efforts at giving us a believable, appealing romantic relationship. It's maybe stretching to believe that Riker would be so thoroughly and passionately infatuated with Soren after knowing her for such a short amount of time, but then, that's how infatuation, and sometimes even love, works, and Frakes does a great job of selling his transition from friendly, to interested, to invested. I've complained in the past about how often Troi and Beverly's romantic entanglements read as bland, Harlequin romance novel versions of actual emotional connection. With Riker and Soren, we're allowed to see a connection build over more than just a scene or two. It may not be the romance of the century, but it is very well done, especially for this series, and that's a good thing even beyond saving us the agony of bad poetry; the ending wouldn't work if we didn't care for Soren nearly as much as Riker does.

So, good job to writer Jeri Taylor for making so much of this work. It's also just a fun episode to watch, until it suddenly stops being fun and becomes really, really sad. The "null space" concept is cool, even if I didn't take thorough enough notes to describe it in detail, and Soren and Riker's rescue mission is exciting and suspenseful. We get some fun scenes between Worf, Data, Beverly, and Troi over the poker table (did you know that Worf is, like, crazy sexist? At least he is this episode, which is unfortunate, considering how often he's talked about his appreciation of strong women). After everything goes to hell, there's a great conversation between Worf and Riker before the two join forces on a rescue mission to save Soren. Oh yeah, the plot: Despite their best efforts to hide their attraction (i.e., walking away from a party a few yards before making out), Soren and Riker are discovered by her people, and Soren is jailed. She's tried for her "crime," she gives a speech about how messed up all this is, and then she's sentenced to "psychotectic therapy," which is what prompts Riker (despite Picard's neutrality and the Prime Directive) to try and save her. He fails.

Yeah, we'll get to that. But first, Soren's speech in the courtroom is the closest the episode comes to becoming overly preachy. It's the character's second big monologue in the episode; the first comes when she reveals her feelings and true self to Riker for the first time, and *that* monologue is aces, a well-written, intimate, and deeply unsettling

account of just how thoroughly messed up poor Soren's life has been and how horribly she and others like her have been treated by their kind. It's that second speech that's a little much, because it's by and large boilerplate "If you prick me, do I not bleed?" holding forth. This is nothing you haven't seen before in a dozen other social issue movies or shows, and it could have been a disaster, but it's saved largely by Melinda Culea, the actress playing Soren. She's low-key throughout the episode, quiet but not precisely shy, underplaying most of the emotional beats so that when she does raise her voice, it's very powerful.

The other reason the courtroom defense doesn't hurt the episode as badly as it might have is that it falls on deaf ears. When Soren finishes her plea, we cut to a commercial break, confident that by the laws of TV drama she's managed to earn herself a reprieve, but when we come back to the trial, the judge simply pities her for being "sick" and sends her away. Riker begs to be allowed to take Soren back with him to the *Enterprise*, but the judge explains that they really do believe she's sick, and they care for their citizens, and Soren is going to have her treatment no matter what. And she does. When Riker and Worf beam back down to the planet and take out Soren's guards, it's too late; the psychotectics have done their dirty work, and "she" is now "gender neutral," her past self essentially murdered by science. Soren apologizes to Riker for the inconvenience, and he returns to the ship, back to work, haunted by what he (and she) have lost.

There are ways of reading this last scene that make it not entirely brutal. The judge who explains the J'naii position to Riker does sound legitimately sincere, no matter how misguided, and we're told that people who've had the "therapy" lead happy lives afterwards. Maybe Soren is fine now, and "Outcast" was trying, in some stupidly misguided way, to be fair to both sides of the sexuality wars. But I refuse to believe this. For one, Soren's speech, heavy-handed or no, is inarguable in its basic message, and while the "fixed" Soren doesn't twitch or show any obvious signs of discomfort when Riker finds him/her, that doesn't mean that Soren is better off post-treatment. It's shocking when Riker finally realizes what's happened, and it's not shocking because you can't see it coming. It's shocking because *TNG* never does this, it never punishes a complete innocent in such a cruel, irrevocable way. We've had downbeat endings before, but there's nearly always some mitigating factor to cushion the blow, and if there isn't, it rarely feels this brutal. When a Romulan defector commits suicide after realizing he's been played by his own people for a fool, it's sad, but there's a pleasing completeness to the moment, as though that story couldn't have any other ending; when an older scientist returns to his people to die as he's told, it's disappointing, but it's still his choice.

And there's the rub right there: choice. Soren's choice is stripped away from her, and we're given no comfort in that, no compensation, no balancing sense that the universe might somehow redress this wrong. "Outcast" avoids the usual pitfalls of social metaphor eps through great performances and writing, and also because, in the end, it doesn't give us the catharsis of a happy ending. There's no relief here, no lie that, "Well, our world sucks, but at least everything's fine on my favorite show!" This is an ugly, awful situation, and it happens whenever the majority decides to impose its view of morality without thought, mercy, or compassion. The real tragedy here is that this episode first aired almost 20 years ago—and it still stings.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- Is it just me, or is Picard's adherence to the Prime Directive really turning into a drag? Seems like every week he has to give someone a speech about how they can't meddle in blah blah blah. I appreciate that *TNG* has a more nuanced approach to interstellar politicking, but I hope we get to see Stewart kick some ass soon.

- Jonathan Frakes objected to casting a woman as Soren, arguing that man-on-man kissing would've backed up the episode's thesis stronger. I'm not sure he's right. We've never seen any indication that Riker is bisexual on the show, and to introduce that at this late stage, just for thematic purposes, would probably have been pushing it. But it might've been interesting.
- I am amazed that I got through this entire review without mentioning Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. It's a great science fiction novel about a man who visits a planet of people who change their genders as they see fit. I haven't read it in years, so I couldn't really use it in the discussion here, but you should check it out.
- "Commander, tell me about your sexual organs." The rare *TNG* pick-up line that is both intentionally hilarious and meant to be a pick-up line.
- Riker's scene with Troi was... interesting. Riker's had plenty of romantic partners on the show before, and this is the first time I can remember him warning Troi that he was seeing someone. It's done to show us just how serious his feelings for Soren are, but I'm not convinced it was necessary. Both Frakes and Sirtis handle it well, though.

"Cause and Effect"

Or The One Where The One Where The One Where

Well, somebody up there must like me, because after all my griping in last week's review about season five, this week I got one of the best double features yet. "The Outcast" is some high-minded, surprisingly powerful drama, and "Cause and Effect" is what, at heart, will always be my favorite *Trek* flavor, even though I'm now old enough realize other types can be just as good. We have ourselves a good old fashioned piece of sci-fi trickery here, one with time travel that doesn't telegraph its plot, that trusts its audience enough to blow up the *Enterprise* in the cold open and not immediately explain why, and, hell, Kelsey Grammar shows up. Sure, not till the very end, but it's kind of awesome anyway. (This means that Frasier is now officially a captain in the *Trek*-verse. DO NOT TRY AND ARGUE THIS.) I knew just enough about this episode going in to have some very high expectations indeed, and I was not disappointed.

I wasn't kidding about that cold open, by the way. It's one of the shortest I've seen on the show. When we come in, we find the *Enterprise* is already seriously damaged, and the situation goes from bad to terrifying in seconds. Picard starts shouting for everyone to abandon ship, and then we pull back to space just in time to watch everyone we've spent the past four-and-a-half seasons caring about explode. (All at once. I mean, it's not like each cast member steps up, introduces himself, and then blows up. Although that would make for a cool end credits sequence.) BOOM. Opening credits. That's a hook, my friends; cold opens are designed to grab an audience's attention and hold them through that first commercial break, and this one's a shocker. Obviously, we know that everyone isn't actually dead, but that doesn't make the urge to find out just what the hell's going on any less potent.

It's a good thing that cold open is so strong, too, because a good chunk of the episode which follows, while fascinating in its way, isn't as immediately gripping. Picard records a new captain's log. Beverly, Data, Worf, and Riker play poker. Geordi has a minor accident, and Beverly does what she can for him, though neither quite know what's going on. Beverly hears some voices in her room, and she's not the only one on the ship who experiences this. No one knows what to make of it, though. One of my favorite aspects of *TNG*'s approach to a mystery is that other characters always take the afflicted person's problem seriously, but while Picard and the others grant that whatever Beverly experienced was real, that doesn't mean any of them are capable of understanding what's going on. The usual staff meeting is interrupted when Ensign Ro gets some readings off a space-time anomaly. (You gotta spray for those.) Everyone heads up to the bridge. While they're investigating the anomaly, a ship pops out in front of them. In

order to prevent a collision, Data suggests using the tractor beam to divert the new ship's path. Picard "makes it so," but the new ship still hits the *Enterprise*, and, well, remember that cold open? BOOM.

And then we're back to the same place we started. Picard's brief narration. The poker game. Only this time, Beverly has this feeling she's done this before. The feeling persists, and she starts asking questions, but none of those questions come fast enough to prevent the same basic pattern from recurring, and, again, BOOM. Now, you could argue this is boring. We're seeing the same basic outline of scenes playing again and again, and while there's variation, there's none of the sense of power that usually comes from time loop stories. One of the charms of *Groundhog Day* is that Bill Murray is aware of what's happening, and when he realizes the parameters of his situation, he can take advantage of it. Everybody has had fantasies about knowing exactly what was going to happen on a given day and being able to use that knowledge to construct a perfect afternoon.

In "Cause," nobody gets to play a god, because nobody really realizes they're repeating. Beverly comes the closest (and it's an unexpected, pleasant surprise that this episode relies largely on her as the main POV character), but the most she gets to show off is when she predicts what cards Data will deal during the second to last iteration. This cuts down on the episode's fun factor as a power trip fantasy, but the amount of respect it shows for the viewer is gratifying. Given its unusual premise, "Cause" is wonderfully realistic in its plotting. There's no reason for anyone onboard the ship to be aware of what's going on, just as there's no reason to let us in on what's happening apart from simply letting it happen over and over again. Of course we figure out the problem fairly quickly. We have an edge, because we get to watch each repetition, but it's not like there's an exposition dump from some external source to bring us up to speed.

I appreciate that; I said this was "old-fashioned," but the way content dictates form (in that this episode doesn't really play like a standard *TNG* episode) here seems fairly modern. I also appreciate how short a time period our heroes have to realize their predicament. It seems like roughly a day, maybe less, and crises on the *Enterprise* rarely happen this quickly. Usually there's at least some window of days between suspecting something's amiss and everyone dying. So Picard can take Beverly's concerns about voices seriously, and he can tell her to keep an eye on it, but it's meaningless, because they'll all be exploded and reset in a few hours. They do accumulate knowledge between jumps, but it's not like taking notes or remembering mistakes. The real trick of the episode, once the central problem is established, is finding a way out of that problem that doesn't cheat the rules established in the first few loops. In a very real sense, that's where the suspense comes from; not in whether or not the *Enterprise* will eventually survive, but whether or not the writer (Brannon Braga) will provide that resolution fairly.

I'd say he does. The idea that each trip through the loop leaves echoes that can be sensed as they intensify may not have basis in scientific fact (or maybe it does, I don't really know). I do know that it makes enough intuitive sense to work within the episode, especially because in and of itself it's not a cure-all. The only way Geordi and Data are able to use these echoes to save themselves down the line is by sending a simple message that only future-past Data can perceive. The message can't be very long, though, and there's no guarantee as to how Data will respond to it. Ultimately, Data opts to send back the number 3, which turns out to be the number of pips on Riker's collar, signifying to the next Data iteration that in order to break the pattern, they need to follow Riker's plan for pushing off the other ship.

"Cause" has some flaws. Given the rules established for what scenes we could see during each loop, the repetition does get old by the end. While there's excitement in seeing what effect Data's message will have on events, the final, definitive course of events does feel padded in spots, as we start re-seeing sequences we're already familiar with in ways that don't provide us with any new information. (We also watch scenes that've been described to us before, like Picard sitting and reading a book. I'm a Picard fan, no question, but I'm not sure I need visual proof that he wasn't making up his evening just to convince everyone he was literate.) Once Geordi and Data's plan works and Data

manages to save the day (by, um, not suggesting a course of action that will get everyone killed), there's a little more exposition than I needed about what happened. Although that's probably just me being picky. I did love the idea of Data sub-consciously littering the entire *Enterprise* with secret "3"s for them to discover.

Once the day has been saved and time is no longer out of joint, Picard has someone check the ship's clocks against a Starfleet time-base beacon, and they learn they've been looping for 17.4 days. It's a smart twist, as I've often wondered what happened to the *Enterprise* when it got stuck in some sort of temporal mire; one could imagine them wasting decades on a five-year mission without realizing it. And of course, that's what happened to Captain Kelsey Grammar and his crew on the *Bozeman*. Without their knowledge, they've been shot forward in time roughly 90 years. Once again, *TNG* does what it does best: You take an ostensibly goofy idea, and then you make it sting by thinking through the consequences.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- I'm curious as to why the time loop only occurred when the *Enterprise* exploded. It's not like the explosion created the anomaly; it was already there to let the *Bozeman* through. Was someone just giving them a do-over?
- I love Beverly's constant references to "10 other people" on the ship who've been experiencing the same voices she hears. The crew must be very well-conditioned to immediately reporting any symptoms of potential distress, no matter how minor.

Next week: We visit Wesley at Starfleet Academy for "The First Duty" and spend some time with (sigh) Alexander in "Cost of Living."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The First Duty"/"Cost Of Living"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[4/21/11 10:00AM](#)

"The First Duty"

Or The One Where Wesley Stands Up

It's difficult being the best. Because when you're a kid and you're smarter than most other kids around... well, sure, it has its moments. Your parents are probably going to be super proud of you, and school work won't ever pose much of a challenge, at least not for a while, and you get to read the really good books sooner than anybody else. On the down side, being smart also means you tend to be more self-conscious from an early age, because you think before you act, which is a sort of social death. Children your age at best won't understand you, and at worst will punish you for standing out of from the crowd. So you work harder, and you get used to being lonely, because hey, this is your gift and your privilege, and you're *special*, right, you're some kind of genius or something. And if you don't go through the regular motions of hanging out and if you have a hard time meeting people, that's just the price you pay for your talent. You're going to make everyone proud someday. You're going to show all them and then that will make up for a lot.

Everyone knows this part of the arc. It's very sad. But there's more! As you get older, the work gets harder, and maybe you didn't learn the right lessons when you were young: how to study when the lessons weren't immediately obvious, how to pace yourself, how it's okay if you don't get it all on the first try. Or hey, maybe you did learn these lessons. But even still, the work gets harder, and it becomes more and more important for you to be the best, the golden boy. So much is riding on your shoulders. Everyone has put their expectations on you, and you've been perfect so long, so you can't fail now. Worse, the same old successes aren't quite cutting it the way they once did. Just getting perfect grades? Eh, we've seen it. Tops in all your classes? Filling your plate with extra-curriculars?

Getting into the best college, making the best friends, joining the best teams? Not bad, right, but what have you done for me *lately*.

Wesley Crusher returns in "The First Duty," and while his situation isn't quite as dire as all that, he's clearly struggling with some of that golden boy pressure. He's doing well at Starfleet Academy, and Picard has been invited to give the commencement address for this year's class. (Which would be remarkable, wouldn't it? I don't even remember the name of the guy who gave my commencement address. He was a business mogul and terribly bland, although that may just be my goofy ass liberal arts major brain talking.) Before the *Enterprise* arrives at Earth, however, there's a grave accident: Wesley, although with the four other cadets that make up the "Nova Squadron," is involved in the accident while training for a planned maneuver around Saturn for graduation ceremonies. One cadet, Joshua Albert, is killed when five single-pilot ships collide mid-flight, and now, Wesley and the others will be called on by the head of the Academy, Admiral Brand, to explain the circumstances that lead to the accident.

"Duty" is a fine episode, probably the best Wesley-centric episode I've seen, in no small part due to the fact that it never really *feels* like a Wesley-centric episode. His dramatic arc from guilt to lying to questioning to confession and repentance is the spine of the story, but much of the episode is built on the mystery surrounding exactly what happened out there around Saturn, so much of the episode, the Boy Blunder is held at arm's length. Instead, we see events unfolding largely from Picard's perspective, and that is never a bad thing. It seems like ages since we've had Picard as the central figure of a storyline (he was the hero of "Power Play," but that was more ensemble driven; the last time we got some real Patrick Stewart greatness was, what, his argument with Matt Frewer in "Matter of Time"?), and it's great to see him do more here than simply sit on the sidelines, handing down vaguely paternal advice. Oh sure, he does that, but this isn't some mildly pleasant, live-and-let-live captaining; when Picard realizes what Wesley and the others have done, he goes into full on Old Testament God mode, and it's terrific.

This episode also marks the first appearance of Boothby, the groundskeeper whom Picard recommended Wesley seek out and befriend back in "Final Mission." Ray Walston plays Boothby, and while the character skirts up against cliché, Walston's performance is low-key enough to make it largely work. He and Stewart play off each other well in their scenes together, which is good, since Boothby only ever appears on screen with Picard. Despite Picard's recommendation, there's never any real sense that Wesley has connected with the groundskeeper; Boothby knows his name and knows a fair bit about the Nova Squadron (including the highly motivated Nicholas Locarno, played by Robert Duncan McNeill, who would later go on to play Tom Paris on *Voyager*), but we never see Wesley going to Boothby for advice, nor do we ever get a sense that Wesley has done so in the past. Which means that when a moral crisis arrives, Wesley doesn't have a gruff, stern paternal figure on hand to come in and point him in the right direction, so Picard has to step in.

While Picard is using Data and Geordi to determine what caused the accident and reminiscing with Boothby over his own mistakes, Wesley is slowly panicking. He's doing it in a controlled fashion, which is just what you'd expect from someone whose spent his whole life on the straight and narrow, but he's not happy with what's going down, and it takes repeated reassurances from squad leader Locarno to keep him believing that silence is the best way to go. See, it wasn't just an accident that took Josh's life. The Nova squadron are school champions, and as befits champions (as is *required* of them, even, to keep impressing everyone), they decide to bust out a flight routine that's been forbidden at the Academy for over a hundred years, the Kolvoord Starburst. It's a showy, incredibly risky move, and when they tried to rehearse it, they screwed up. So now, Locarno is pushing for everyone to lay the blame on Josh's door. He's dead, he won't care, so say he was getting nervous and twitchy at the controls, and no one has to know about the real mistake.

The episode does a great job of making Wesley's situation as ambiguous as possible. What happened was awful, but it's over now, and this isn't the sort of crime that would automatically lead to other crimes. Yes, Josh's good name is

getting dragged through the mud, which would be miserable for his parents (all we ever see is his father; Ed Lauter appears to have been driven mad by grief, as his eyes spend most of their time on screen trying to push out of the actor's skull, but he does apologize to Wesley for Josh's "failure," which is pretty brutal), but it's easy to see how quickly rationalization of the cover-up would take hold. Josh is dead, and he was a good friend, but a dead friend is still dead, and he doesn't have a career to worry about anymore. And he'll be dead even if they confess and put their own careers in jeopardy. It's not exactly a victim-less crime, but it's hard to see what good stepping forward and confessing will do anyone at this point. No one's ever going to know. There will be some reprimands for improper procedure and maybe a little suspicion, but who cares?

But of course Picard cares, and of course Data and Geordi are able to piece together just enough information for Picard to figure out what went wrong. He confronts Wesley with this knowledge in his ready room, and Picard's anger throughout this scene is remarkable; I can't remember ever seeing him this angry at Wesley before (well, apart from that first Lore episode, but that was back in season one, when Picard was *always* pissed off), and while we in the audience can understand that this is all for Wesley's own good, that he needs someone to stop him in his tracks before he starts down the wrong path... well, it's still thrilling to see. And I don't even say this from an anti-Wesley perspective. I've taken my fair share of pot-shots at the character before, and he was never as compelling as his position on the series would seem to indicate. The precocious wonder boy never quite fit in with *TNG*'s aesthetic, as it felt too much like a series of children's books grafted on to a (generally) adult drama. But he had his moments, and of all the Wesley episodes, this one is the most successful at making you feel for the guy. He's in an impossible situation. He's over-reached, and now, in order to listen to the dictates of his conscience, he'll have to betray his friends and admit to the people whose respect matters most to him that he failed and that he is partly responsible for a friend's death.

So the excitement of watching Picard read him the riot act near the end of the episode isn't because of sublimated desire in my heart to see Wesley suffer. It's partly because Patrick Stewart is a tremendous actor, and he's mesmerizing to watch. But it's also because this needed to happen, because after so many years of being praised and petted by a world of adulatory adults, Wesley needs to be treated like an adult who is both capable of moral decision and culpable if he fails to make those decisions well. Stepping forward and telling the truth isn't an easy decision, and it certainly won't immediately improve his life or bring Josh back from the dead. And yet, for all his brilliance and his prodigious ability, this is the one decision Wesley needs to make that can truly define his character. Everything else was a game of some form or another. Now it's time for him to take responsibility for his actions, because if he doesn't, even if there are no immediate consequences, he'll be compromised, and the next time a situation arises where the right course is a little too difficult, who knows what could happen.

In the end, Wesley stands up and does the right thing, in front of everyone. He gets held back a year at the Academy, and Locarno gets expelled. Actually, in a nice twist, Locarno makes sure Wesley and others aren't expelled as well, by taking full responsibility for what happened; he may have been lying, but he wasn't a complete jerk. (Which adds to the ambiguity, too, because if Picard hadn't investigated further, what might have happened if Wesley had kept his mouth shut? Maybe Locarno would've turned out okay. Maybe Wesley wouldn't have gone insane with grief. Who knows?) "Duty" is the first time we've seen any of Starfleet Academy on any *Trek* series, and while the school isn't really a traditional setting for a space-faring sci-fi series, the lesson here is the same as it is all over the galaxy, for geniuses and fools and anybody: You make your choices, and you pay the consequences.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- If I had any nitpicks for this episode, it would be that Picard's threat to go public with his conclusions if Wesley stayed silent makes Wesley's choice a little less than a choice. It makes sense, in that Wesley's still fairly young, and maybe he needs this one last shove, but it might have worked better if Picard had simply said, "Look, I can't prove this, so I won't say anything if you don't. But don't expect me to give a damn about you from here on."
- "The first duty of every Starfleet officer is to the truth." That whole speech was aces.
- According to Memory Alpha, Robert Duncan was supposed to reprise his role as Locarno for *Voyager*, until somebody realized that, if he did, they'd have to pay royalties to the original writers of "The First Duty" for the entire run of the show. Thus, Tom Paris was born.

"Cost of Living"

Or The One Where Lwaxana Meets Alexander And I Die A Little Inside

This is an episode which stars Alexander, Worf's son, and Lwaxana Troi. Y'all are lucky I made it past the half-hour mark without clawing my eyes out. I'm going to try a slightly different format than usual here, and just give you my notes from the episode as it was happening (with, of course, some adjustments and additional notes for clarity).

Blowing up an asteroid, Tessen III, Dangerous core is still around

Whenever I review an episode, I try and write down as many new proper nouns I can. This is where closed captioning comes in super helpful. I doubt many people come here for hard facts about *TNG*, but it does help make the writing easier if I don't have to keep referring to everything as "that planet over there" and "some star system or something." It's not always useful, though, as in this case; Tessen III never really comes up again. The important bit to remember here is that the *Enterprise* destroys an asteroid before it hits a planet, and when the core of the asteroid blows up, it releases a dust cloud that infects the *Enterprise* and makes a much more interesting story than the drama we spend most of the hour suffering through.

Troi, Alexander, Worf in counseling

Alexander is still insanely annoying here. He shouts *all the time*. I think we're supposed to find Worf unreasonable, but I think he honestly deserves some sort of medal for not punting the little brat out the nearest airlock.

Lwaxana is getting married, wants to hold the ceremony in Ten Forward, the groom is Campio, third minster to the conference of judges Kostolain

And here is where the true horror of this episode becomes clear. It's not just Alexander; it's also Lwaxana, and she's just bringing the crazy like nobody's business. Also, here's another example of "recording names of places that no one really gives a damn about." I mean, it's not like Kostolain is ever going to be in a trivia quiz. Unless you're writing fan fiction (maybe Campio was actually an assassin who married Lwaxana as a cover so he could murder Picard!), who cares?

They haven't met yet

Sigh. *Classic Lwaxana.*

Worf and Alexander are drawing up contracts. KILL ME. I'm with Worf. This is hell

Already, my mind is starting to slip. Troi suggests Worf and Alexander make up contracts of their obligations, and Worf isn't a huge fan. Alexander immediately starts whining about how Worf won't follow through on anything, and it's all intended to drive the brat towards Lwaxana, so they can be friends or something. But you know what? I don't

watch this show for parenting tips or for tepid family dramas. The more time I spend with Alexander, the more infuriated I am that Worf, of all the characters on the show, has been saddled with this irritating lump of tedium.

"Nothing would please me more than to give away Mrs. Troi."

I may just be imagining this, but it seems like Picard has gone from "trying to hide a possible attraction to Lwaxana" to "pure, unfettered irritation." I find this latter reaction far more believable.

Colony of Free Spirits This is terrifying. Holodeck

And here's where we go from bad to nauseating. I'm sure some people would find Lwaxana's idyllic artist's retreat to be a whimsical place full of enchantment and, uh, whimsy. To me, it's a lot of good old-fashioned nightmare fuel, made all the worse because everyone involved seems to think they're utterly wonderful. There's a multi-colored head floating in a bubble; a juggler who juggles edible "worlds" (and buddy, nobody's impressed that you can manage three balls at once); a pair of Suessian exiles who argue constantly; and a pontificating blowhard with a beard. It's supposed to be charming, and that's the worst kind of awful, I think. The forced chumminess and unfunny jokes make me gag.

"The higher the fewer."

"Why is a raven like a writing desk?" (In context, this bit makes absolutely no sense. I guess Alexander's habit of quoting it is supposed to be an indication of his childlike childishness, but, as with nearly everything else in this episode, it's pretty dumb.)

Looking for Alexander. Mud bath. Ugh

All right, just to catch you up: Lwaxana has taken Alexander into the holodeck so he can enjoy all the horrors of the Colony of Free Spirits. They're doing a full spa treatment, and Worf is upset because Alexander is missing his scheduled therapy time with Deanna. Eventually, Deanna realizes what's going on and zzzzzzzzz sorry, what?

SO FUCKING IRRITATING

No comment.

Whoa. Naked chick dancing!

Yeah, so this happened. A dancer does a number while Alexander and Lwaxana are in the mud, and the dancer is covered in body paint and a few strategically placed bits of... moss? Mud? Anyway, she's mostly nude. Given Lwaxana's attitude towards nakedness, this isn't that surprising, but then again, it sort of is.

"You're telling me you're not going to be naked at your own wedding?" Oh thank god

Oh, past Zack. You really are charmingly naive sometimes.

The computer is having problems. Creates sausage instead of tea. Thank god, a plot that I can sort of give a shit about

I'm clearly turning bitter at this point in the note-taking process, but the episode's secondary plot (which, come to think of it, never really ties into the main story) isn't bad. The dust from the asteroid is a parasite eating all the nitrium in the *Enterprise's* engines and leaving behind a sort of fecal goo. ("A Sort of Fecal Goo" would've made a better title for this episode, actually.)

Alexander and Lwaxana talking about marriage. She admits to him she's settling

To dial down the sarcasm just a tad, I did appreciate "Cost"'s attempts to once again remind us of the real sadness

that lies behind all of Lwaxana's antics. She's alone, she's getting older, and as much as she might put on a good show, the odds of her finding someone she actually might want to spend the rest of her life with are distressingly low. There are aspects of this episode that I wanted to enjoy, and not just the sci-fi plot; while Lwaxana isn't exactly appealing, her potential groom, Campio, is a stuffed shirt ass, and her eventual refusal to compromise her principles in order to find a mate should be triumphant. But it's just too much. She spends roughly 80 percent of her time on the show being forceful, obnoxious, and disrespectful of others. Making her depressed every now and again isn't going to make up for hours of anti-entertainment.

Laughing Hour: worst thing ever?

HA! and yes. (The Colony has a "Laughing Hour," which in practical terms, means that at random intervals for the rest of the episode, Alexander will start to go "HA! HA!" Remarkably, this is even more irritating than it sounds.)

Running into problems with Campio. KILL ME

My notes become something of a broken record at this point. But yes, there's a scene with everyone shouting, because Lwaxana and Alexander want to spend time together, and Campio and Worf and Deanna are not happy with this.

Yes, because we can't possible chase them into the holodeck

I sometimes think the writers believe that just because the holodeck can create spaces that appear bigger than the 'deck actually is, then people can hide inside the program. Surely Worf would have the clearance to simply turn off whatever program Lwaxana and Alexander were engaged in. As escape plans go, this is like running out of the bedroom to hide under the kitchen table.

The holodeck program is disrupted by the parasite. The turbolift starts fucking up. Whoa, life support slipping, Data has to follow through if everyone passes out.

Oh thank god, the other plot kicks in. Briefly, we're led to believe that the parasite that has been slowly infiltrating the rest of the ship might actually be relevant to all this Alexander/Lwaxana foolishness when the holodeck starts acting up. Such is not the case, however, as Lwaxana and the others (apart from Worf) largely disappear through the rest of this crisis. Geordi and Data determine that the best way to get rid of the evil space dust is by returning it to the asteroid field from whence it came, which is what they do; except that, given the low power levels through the ship, everyone on board passes out except for Data. But hey, it's Data, so he gets the job done and saves the day and doesn't even ask for a raise.

Oh great the wedding. Troi's hair is kinda hilarious

Yes, it's wedding time. And yes, Troi's hair *is* hilarious. She looks like she should be on stage singing back-up at a Prince concert.

Lwaxana is late, and when she shows up, she's naked. Heh. That's cute. Still. KILL ME

And thus does Lwaxana once again show she's a free spirit, and thus does Majel Barrett reveal far more skin than I'm entirely comfortable with seeing. I dunno. This could've been tolerable in theory, if Campio wasn't played as such an obvious tool. He has a protocol minister with him, for god's sake. How did Lwaxana possibly think this could work? And how would someone this obsessed with protocol ever consider marrying someone of a completely different race? I wish I could find something beautiful in her commitment to her ideals, but, as is so often the case with Lwaxana plots, this just seems like a selfish, immature twit forcing others to once again bow to her shallow whims. I also don't find it particularly life-affirming that she and Alexander bonded. Like attracts like, after all.

"You're just supposed to sit here?"

And thus we end in the only possible way an episode like this could've ended, with Worf forced to kowtow to a psychotic harridan and his ungrateful gnat of a son. I suppose if there's any consolation here, it's the knowledge that we got a Lwaxana episode and an Alexander episode out of the way at the same time, and hopefully, we'll have the rest of the season to enjoy trying to forget they exist. And that does it for this week. No worries if this format didn't work for you. I should have picked up sufficient pieces of my brain to go back the usual house style in time for next week. Ciao!

Grade: C

Next week: We try not to hit on "The Perfect Mate," who in all probability is almost certainly just an "Imaginary Friend."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Perfect Mate"/"Imaginary Friend"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[4/28/11 10:00AM](#)

"The Perfect Mate"

Let's get this out of the way first: there are Ferengi in this episode. They're on screen for less than ten minutes total, and they're really only here as a clumsy way to move the plot, but they're still as awful as ever. On a show that goes out of its way to treat different cultures with dignity and respect, the Ferengi remain a sore spot, a group of cringingly unfunny schemers who haven't developed much beyond their debut appearance in the first season's "The Last Outpost." Elmer Fudd is better defined than these morons, and far, far more entertaining to watch. I suppose the point is to show that greed for wealth is comically pathetic, unlike greed for power, which is scary and, let's be honest here, kind of cool. But it represents an irritating and persistent laziness on the writers, as the show keeps bringing them back for no good reason. It's like if Gargamel did guest spots on *The Wire*, only, y'know, awful.

But apart from that, this is actually a very interesting ep, one that takes on a plot with all kinds of potential for heavy-handedness or wish-fulfillment, and tries to deal with it with the seriousness and tact it deserves. (Again, apart from the Ferengi.) Even better, while there are definite ways to connect this to real life, the metaphor here is never all that specific. We're not dealing with rape or homosexuality or any of the other serious issues that *Trek* shows sometimes try and lecture on. This is more about characters and relationships through the filter of science fiction, and, for the most part, it lets us draw our own conclusions.

The *Enterprise* is once again doing chauffeur service, this time ferrying Ambassador Briam from Krios to a meeting with Chancellor Alrik of Valt Minor, for a negotiation of peace accords which will hopefully finally bring an end to a lot of fighting. Briam has a special gift for Alrik which he keeps stored in the *Enterprise*'s cargo bay, even going so far as to request that Picard make that bay off limits to everyone else on the ship—and for good reason. After the Ferengi trick their way on board the ship (the sabotage their own craft to make it look like they're in need of rescue),

one of them breaks into the cargo bay, and starts fiddling with the "gift," which looks sort of like a glowing amber egg. He knocks the egg over by accident, and just as Picard and Briam arrive to survey the damage, the egg flashes out of existence, leaving behind a stunningly beautiful woman. Who immediately says to Picard, "I am for you, Alrik of Valt," which is about as good a reason for changing your name as I've ever heard.

The woman is Kamala, played by a young Famke Janssen, and it's on her that the episode hinges. She's the metamorph I mentioned above, and she's culturally and genetically hardwired to please whatever man she's closest to, by sensing his feelings and desires and then tailoring her personality to suit them. Which is a tricky notion, to say the least, but even trickier is the fact that she's on the ship so that she can marry Alrik as part of the peace accords, to seal the deal, so to speak. When she bonds with someone for life, she sets herself in whatever personality that mate prefers the most, which makes this, from a certain light, a pervasive and inescapable form of slavery. Picard does his best to play the non-interference card (most likely because he's as attracted to Kamala as anyone, and can't trust his own impartiality), but Beverly tells him that the whole set-up is wrong, and that he needs to do something about it. Which is he doesn't—but does—but doesn't. It's complicated.

What do we want in romantic partners? And, more importantly for this episode, what do we want our romantic partners to want out of us? There's a lot of conversation here about Kamala's needs, about just how much she can truly be expected to make her own decisions (she says that she has no problems with marrying Alrik, believing that this was what she's essentially "made" for), and just how susceptible the men of the *Enterprise* are to her charms. Riker, unsurprisingly, gets a couple of kisses; around him, Kamala is aggressive, playful, and, ahem, educated. Around some miners the *Enterprise* rescued, she's rowdy, and nearly starts a fight. Around Worf, she growls. And around Picard, she's... intrigued. Unlike the others, Picard is largely resistant to her seductions, which of course rouses her interest, and she starts trying to spend more time with him. Picard keeps resisting, but this becomes even more difficult when the Ferengi inadvertently injure Briam, and Picard is forced to handle the upcoming ceremonies himself.

There's obviously a certain amount of fantasy in here, and just how much fantasy is left up to the individual viewer to decide. Everyone at some point or another has imagined themselves with the perfect lover, with someone who would sense your innermost yearnings, the ones you could barely articulate yourself, and then act on them in ways that left you satisfied like no one else ever could hope to satisfy you. This is called "being 15." Although maybe younger for girls? Anyway, it's a teenage fantasy, is my point, because when you're a teenager, when you're just figured out that your genitals are like biological transformers, and the thing you've been using as a "car" for your whole life is also a totally bitchin' robot. So you don't really know what you want, and you dream of someone who'll come in and know all there is to know about you, all the things you don't really understand yet, and even better, they recognize your *real* self, that self nobody else gets, the self that in your deepest darkest heart, you worry may not really be there. Which isn't to say that older people don't occasionally pine for this very specific concept of perfection, but as you get more mature, and come into your own, you realize how silly the whole idea is, how a relationship based on one person subsuming themselves entirely to the other's needs is deeply unhealthy for both parties. Or maybe you just realize it's impossible, and so the fantasy becomes an occasional idle daydream.

The point being, this isn't something that could actually happen in any sustainable way, outside a fantasy or science-fiction context. Kamala is a construct, created specifically to give Picard a moral problem to solve, and because of that, she runs the risk of being more idea than character, which, when you combine that with the fact that one of the crucial aspects of what little character she does seem to have is her ability to change herself at will to reflect someone else, makes for a potentially troubling situation in deed. Kamala could've simply ended up a male power trip, and watching Picard resist her charms is sort of like a sensitive male's power trip. (See, he's too good to give in, but she keeps pushing him, and as in all grand romances, eventually, the pushed will fall, and whose fault would that be?) Then there's the fact that we get a few jokes about having men assigned to Kamala specifically because they're

resistant to her charms (Briam is too old, and Data is, well, Data), but we never see Kamala hanging out with a woman. This is Dude's Only, ladies. Sorry! (Although apparently, Krios is jammed full of male empathic metamorphs, so now you have a good idea where you should head on your next vacation.)

I think "Mate" works on the whole, though, for a couple key reasons. The first is that Janssen, in addition to being, let's not kid ourselves here, really rather lovely, does a fairly good job of showing how much Kamala enjoys flirting with men. This gives her a certain degree of autonomy; sure, she's hardwired to get pleasure from making others happy, but so is most everybody, and there's nothing malicious or mindless about her, not really. She nearly starts a bar fight in Ten Forward, but it's not that much of a "nearly." The ep could've gone the way of her walking around the *Enterprise* screwing with every guy's head, throwing everything into chaos. Which would've been fairly painful, I'm guessing. But it doesn't go that way. Instead, we're given a sense of someone coming into their own as a sexually aware, potentially powerful individual.

Which makes the ending (the other reason why I think this works) all the more intriguing. As the episode goes on, and Picard is forced by circumstance (and his own desire) to be closer to Kamala, the question becomes whether or not he'll give in to the temptation, and, more importantly, whether or not he should or can help the lady out of her situation. Now, anyone watching this who thinks Picard will succumb to Kamala's charms hasn't been paying attention. If James "The T is for Libido" Kirk could resist a similar seduction in "[Elaan of Troyius](#)", there's no question Picard will do the same, and for much the same reason. But the more he comes to care for her, and the more we see her as a person, the more her proposed marriage to Alrik seems like a bad idea. It's necessary, to ensure the lives of millions, and there really isn't anything else that *could* happen, but if the episode were to simply end with her doing her duty, and Picard looking pensive, well, that wouldn't be enough.

Although she *does* do her duty, and we *do* get a shot of Picard looking pensive (two, in fact), there's a twist here I wasn't expecting. Remember that "permanent bonding" I mentioned earlier, where Kamala sets herself with one person for the rest of her life? It's a dangerous idea, in a way, because it creates an inherent power imbalance—once she's busted her VHS recording tab (kids, ask your parents), she can't change her mind if the relationship goes sour, even though her partner will have no problems doing so. I thought this was just part of the fantasy, and it sort of is, but it also allows for Kamala to make a decision near the end of the episode that allows her to preserve who she is, while still following her obligations. She bonds with Picard. She's supposed to bond with Alrik, and she still marries him, but Picard is the one she imprints on.

You could read this in different ways. You could say it's a horrible example of a woman needing a man to make her "complete," or that Kamala's choice to bond with Picard wasn't actually *her* decision, just the choice that her Picard-focused self made. Those interpretations don't seem entirely unreasonable to me, but I choose to think of it in a more positive light. The perfect fantasy mate is so often a reflection of our own desires because we want to find someone who can show us who we are, who can bring out what's best in ourselves and believe in us in a way that we can't always manage on our own. Kamala does this for others, but I think with Picard, she finds someone who's equally good at reflecting. Picard's job as captain, after all, is to inspire his crew, to drive them to be their greatest selves. The title of this episode, I'd say, has two meanings; it's hard to imagine Kamala finding anything quite like what she experiences with Picard with anyone else. And while the ending isn't a happy one, it's at least one that gives her the respect of making her own decisions.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- Another reason this works: it's Patrick Stewart. The age difference is a little icky, and Picard is basically treated as the ideal man here, but, c'mon. It doesn't really seem implausible, does it?

- "I'm just curious to know what lies beneath." "Nothing. Nothing lies beneath. I'm really quite dull."
- This episode cribs a surprising amount from the *TOS* ep "Elaan" mentioned above. (Also, I think those early *Trek* reviews of mine aren't half bad, although I'm amazed at how much more I write these days.)
- Beverly and Picard's chats together are really very charming. And it also gives us this line: "Beverly, may I take off the uniform for a moment?"
- Oh, and Alrik is unsurprisingly something of a bore. He even views his marriage to Kamala as the least interesting part of the negotiations. But he's not actively evil, so hopefully Kamala won't have too unpleasant a life ahead of her.

"Imaginary Friend"

Or The One Where We Meet A Little Blond Snufflapagus And She Is Pissed

There's a Ray Bradbury short story called "Zero Hour" that I kept thinking of while I watched this episode. The story is in *The Illustrated Man*, which is a good collection if you're interested in tracking it down, and it's a creepy story to be sure. (I find Bradbury the most enjoyable when he's trying to scare the hell out of me; there's a contrast between his ebullient comeliness and horror that hits me very hard.) A bunch of kids start playing with imaginary friends, and the parents don't believe in them, and, well, I won't spoil it or anything, but it's not a very long story, and if you remember "Imaginary Friend" at all, you probably see where I'm coming from here. The problem being that "Friend" isn't five or ten pages long, it's a full forty-five minutes, and while it has some effective scenes, it doesn't really entirely work. The whole thing is pretty ramshackle and clumsily sown together, which is something that tends to happen with shows once they get a little long in the tooth, I've found. Maybe it's because it gets harder to tell new stories, so people just cram a bunch of old ideas together and hope for the best.

The one original idea here is Clara, and her imaginary chum Isabella. Clara has been moving from ship to starbase to ship with her father, Ensign Sutter, and that's not easy on a little kid. So she's seeing Troi now. Apparently her dad is so far in over his head he'll latch on to any potential mother figure for his child; which makes me think of Worf and Alexander (who shows up briefly here, by the way, but is largely unobjectionable), and also makes me wonder how much of Troi's time is spent providing counsel for single fathers. Maybe someone's looking for a replacement mommy. At least that would be a reason for the therapy appointment, because from what we see here, Isabella is a perfectly pleasant little girl, friendly, polite, and, of course, creative. There's a strangely over-protective vibe that runs through all of *TNG*'s episodes about parenting, maybe (although I can't immediately back that up, this is just an impression). Anyway, Clara seems like a cool kid, and as Troi tells Sutter, there's no reason to be concerned that she has an imaginary friend.

Which would be the end of it, except the *Enterprise* is investigating a nebula, which means of course that something strange happens. (I wonder if Picard allows time for "Weird Shit" whenever he does the *Enterprise*'s weekly schedule.) A red light pops into the ship and starts whizzing around, before finding Clara, hearing her talk to Isabella, and then manifesting as Isabella in the flesh, which kind of freaks Clara out. But hey, when I was little, I talked to Popeye a lot, and if he'd suddenly appeared, I'd've eventually gone along with it. When you're little, you don't realize how many impossible things there are. So Clara shows Isabella around the ship—and of course starts getting in trouble because she's going places she shouldn't be going. The *Enterprise* starts having engine problems, and Isabella keeps glaring and demanding things, and Clara keeps telling people that it's Isabella's fault, and nobody believes her. Ugh.

I hate this kind of story. I hate watching people refuse to believe someone, and then accusing that (basically innocent) someone of causing all the trouble. It calls up a lot of deeply uncomfortable associations in me; we can idolize our youth all we want, but the truth is, being a kid means being powerless in the face of a whole lot of

grown-ups. They're supposed to be the responsible ones, they're supposed to be in charge, but really, they're just bigger and they have cooler cars. We're brought up to believe that if we tell the truth, we're doing the right thing, and things will be okay, especially if we haven't done anything wrong. To watch this girl tell the grown-ups the absolute fact, and see her lectured and ignored anyway, is just off-putting as hell. It violates one of the sacred covenants of childhood: the Grown-ups Are Always Right. Which isn't a bad sort of story to tell, inherently, because the grown-ups *aren't* always right, and one of the ways we join their ranks is by realizing their fallibility. But Clara is too young and alone for that kind of maturity, so we just see her running into the same problem, and not being able to do anything about it.

This is also because, despite the title and the main story hook, this episode isn't really *about* Clara. We do spend a lot of time with her, but there's this weird shifting sensation about two-thirds of the way through, once it becomes obvious to everyone that Clara hasn't been lying after all. (This is after Isabella takes Troi down, and thankfully, nobody tries to blame the little blond girl with force-lightning powers on Clara.) Picard basically takes over, and it's his decisions that resolve the big conflict. It turns out (I swear to god, I try not to use that phrase in every review, but it's so damnably *convenient* during plot summaries) Isabella was sent over by a group of life forms out in the nebulae who were trying to decide if they should kill everyone on board the *Enterprise* or not. So Picard makes an impassioned speech about how the importance of proper childrearing techniques (seriously), then fires an energy beam into the cloud of life forms to give them some food to munch on.

What's strange is that this sort of story really should've been told largely through Clara's perspective. She's the one with the special knowledge (although she doesn't understand it) about what's really going on, and she's the one the aliens choose to interact with. She's the one who has our sympathy through most of the episode, and there really should be some sort of cathartic HA! moment when she finally manages to turn the tables and stand up for herself. But there's no moment like that. Picard does all the heavy lifting for her, and the only reason anyone else on the ship realizes what's going on before it's too late is that Isabella decides to reveal herself to Troi. Arguably, this is more realistic, because, hey, Clara really is a little girl, and little girls aren't necessarily going to have a lot of defensive power against strange life forms. By having Picard step in when he does, we avoid having another Wesley situation, where another kid saves the whole ship through a lot of contrivance and exaggerated ability. (It's not that I have a hard time believing Wesley was smart. I just don't believe he was perfectly smart all the time, or that, at fourteen or whatever, he was the biggest genius on a ship full of smart people.)

And yet whether or not this is more realistic, it still leaves us with an episode without a center. Clara is sweet enough, but we've never seen her before, so we don't have all that much invested in her. Her father, Sutter, is a more traditional *TNG* character, but he's ill-defined here, just sort of generally worried and impatient and bland. (At one point, he touches Picard on the shoulder to get the captain's attention, and I really wanted Picard to snap at him to back the hell off.) And of our main characters, only Troi and Picard get enough screen-time to qualify; Troi is mostly on hand to help introduce us to the Sutter family, to put Clara in situations where Isabella can act up, and then to get zapped. (And again, I have to question Troi's empath abilities. Even if she can't sense if someone is lying, she at least should've been able to tell that Clara was terrified and *something* more than met the eye was going on.) Picard is hardly even in the episode till the final ten minutes or so. And it's an odd ten minutes.

The whole ep, Isabella has been set up as creepy as all hell. The actress, Shay Astar (who would go on to play Joseph Gordon-Levitt's girlfriend on *3rd Rock From The Sun*, among other things), isn't going to set the world on fire, but she is effectively unsettling; there's a definite *Bad Seed* sullenness going on there. But when Picard confronts her, she explains how it's all some kind of test, and she rails about how awful the adults are to Clara, which means of course everyone deserves to die. Instead of finding a way to defeat Isabella and her sparkly friends, Picard explains why it's necessary to create boundaries for children, and Isabella accepts this, leaving only to return briefly at the end of the episode to apologize to Clara for causing so many problems. The whole finale feels grafted

on, because it's not like anyone was questioning the basic role of parents in a child's life, or even that Clara was ever treated *that* badly. Clara is pushed to the side for most of the end, and really, it's like they got the "imaginary friend" idea, and then tried to throw in some science crap to justify it (which I imagine happens with at least half the stories on this show), but couldn't come up with a good way to end it. As is, this is little bit of good idea, some effectively unsettling scenes, and lot of shoulder-shrugging.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- Oh right, Guinan was in this. And her presence made things even more confusing, because I guess she was trying to teach a lesson about the importance of imaginary friends? Or something? It was bizarre. (My roommate also objected strenuously to Guinan lecturing Data about finding shapes in the clouds, because it was "the same old bullshit" about "how science is boring and you need to make up crap to make it beautiful." And he's right, it was dumb.)
- I didn't hate Alexander in this. Although his voice still grates.

Next week: The Borg are back in the appropriately titled, "I, Borg," and Geordi and Ro have adventures in "The Next Phase."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "I, Borg"/"The Next Phase"](#)



[Zach Handlen](#)
[5/05/11 10:00AM](#)

"I, Borg"

Or The One Where A Real Tin Man Gets A Heart And A Brain

It's been a while since we last saw the Borg. Nearly two seasons, in fact ("Best of Both Worlds, Part II"). Watching *TNG* straight through for the first time, I'm surprised at how infrequently the Borg appear, as they're the alien race I connect most strongly with this series. They make terrific antagonists, as they represent the polar opposite of everything Picard and the others are trying to accomplish; where the *Enterprise's* crew spends hours angsty over the precise amount of appropriate contact they can have with strange species, the Borg simply force their way of life on any and all they come across. For all its limitations and awkwardness, the Prime Directive is a noble goal, and it's hard to imagine a philosophy more at odds with it than "You will be assimilated." Like how Batman's rogues gallery mirrors his phobias and obsessions, or Spider-man's villains share his animal/insect, science-gone-wrong origins, the Borg is the best kind of nemesis: the sort that throws the hero's essential nature into stark relief. Plus, they're scary as hell, which isn't something that happens that often on *TNG*.

But watching "I, Borg," it becomes easy enough to understand why the Shareware That Walks isn't a more regular fixture on the series. What makes the Borg so effective and unsettling is also what keeps them from being all that easy to write about: they are singular in intent and by design, to the point where there are only so many stories you can tell about them. There's no characterization, no subtle shading, no variety of threat. The Borg are effective because they do not negotiate; they can't be swayed by one of Picard's speeches; and there are no great depths to explore. Sure, I'd be as curious as anybody to hear how Borg society works, but I'm not sure you could structure an

episode around that, which leaves us with two options. Either we find out where the Borg originally came from (which would be fascinating), or we come up with a way to make them a little less scary and a little more distinct.

"I,Borg" goes with the latter option, and while it's always a little disappointing when a cool villain loses some of its mystique, the episode overall does a fine job of giving us yet another tricky ethical problem, without shorting either side of the discussion. It's a bit too easy, sure. The stranded Borg goes from anonymous representative of its entire race to "Third of Five" to "Hugh" very quickly, and the transition occasionally feels cheated, but not egregiously so, and certainly not enough to derail the overall impact of the ep. The big trick here is how comfortable we are accepting the idea that the Borg, while still an immensely powerful and dangerous threat, are potentially more complex than simple one-note baddies. It's a jump that's more or less addressed directly in the text of the ep itself, interestingly enough. I can understand being let down by making the Borg less nightmarish, and "Hugh" is a little on the cute side. But overall, this works, because it reminds us that easy answers, even when they seem righteous, are still rarely a good idea.

The *Enterprise* is charting six star systems known as the Argolis Cluster when they get a signal from a small moon. It's coming from what turns out to be a sort of Borg shuttle-craft, crash-landed on the moon. There's a single survivor, and Beverly insists the Borg be beamed back up to the ship so she can treat him. (It? There's actually a lot of fascinating pronoun trouble throughout the episode; you can generally tell how a character is disposed towards Hugh by whether that character uses "he" or "it.") Picard is reluctant but gives in, possibly because Beverly's plea moves him, but possibly because the germ of an idea is growing in his mind. As soon as the Borg is ensconced in the brig, Picard asks Geordi if it might be possible to alter the creature's programming so that when it returns to the collective, it will spread a virus that could wipe out the entire Borg race in one fell swoop. Geordi says it is possible, and starts to work on the booby trap, while Beverly, being a doctor and such, and there you have your episode.

It's a bit more complicated than that to be sure, but "I, Borg" sets up the parameters of its central debate fairly early on, and apart from Hugh's character development, there isn't really anything in the way of plot twists or striking reversals. And yet it never comes across as boring or belabored, because the question is so massive, and so tricky to negotiate, that it feels like it deserves the full running time to parse out. The Borg are murderous and deadly dangerous, and, as I said before, you can't negotiate with them. They are a threat that can't ever be mitigated by compromise or discussion. So under that logic, when presented with an opportunity that could potentially save millions of lives, isn't Picard obligated to take that chance, whatever moral misgivings his crew might have? But at the same time, the Federation is supposed to be better than their enemy. The Borg would embrace the chance to assimilate large groups without the cost of men or material, but surely Starfleet is above mass, uniform slaughter. The Borg are a life-form after all, however despicable by our standards, and to wipe out the entire race would run the risk of damning the *Enterprise* crew in the same way that Kevin Uxbridge was damned in "The Survivors" back in season 3.

And that's before you take into account the method of destruction. One of the most fascinating elements of "I, Borg" is the shipwrecked survivor that Picard wants to Trojan horse into killing off his own kind. Hugh is a bit on the cute side, and the episode might've worked better if he'd been more frightening at the beginning, if there was a sense of him having to transition from threat to friend, as opposed to just being sad and lonely separated from the rest of the Borg. He never seems dangerous at all, and no one ever asks if he's an assimilated Borg (like Picard was as Locutus) or "home grown." He's treated as just another orphan, and I'm not entirely convinced that's consistent with what we know of the Borg. The balance of a story like this is tricky to pull off, and if "I, Borg" fumbles, it's in making it too easy to sympathize for Hugh's vulnerability. He's not nearly as alien as he really ought to be.

At the same time, though, the episode helps us see the Borg's goals from their own perspective, and it smartly recognizes that, to themselves, the Borg are no more "evil" than we are to ourselves. Hugh misses the voices of the

Borg hive mind, and he feels lonely and lost without the group consciousness to guide him. He's legitimately surprised that Beverly and Geordi might not wish to be assimilated, as though the thought had never occurred to his kind before. (Surely it must've, though? When they assimilate a race, I was under the impression that they downloaded all of that race's cultural knowledge; surely they would get a sense of how feared and despised they are.) I'm not sure if this is entirely believable in context of what we've seen before. You could say that Hugh is "young," and doesn't know all there is to know about being Borg, but that would seemingly violate one of the core principles of his kind, that there is no individual to develop, that all pieces are an equally important (and unimportant) part of the whole. But we've spent so long being frightened by the seemingly malevolent consciousness the Borg represent that there's something fascinating in the idea that "Resistance is futile" may not be a threat, but in fact a sincere, if misjudged, attempt at conciliation: Don't worry. It's all right. Soon you will be one with us all, don't fight it.

This episode is also one of the first in recent memory to use Guinan as more than just a plot device. She's probably the only person on the ship with a more legitimate right to grievance against the Borg than Picard has, and initially, when she learns that Beverly and Geordi having Hugh on board and are running tests, she's extremely upset. When Geordi tries sharing his growing reservations about the project to her, Guinan gets even more upset, until she finally goes to see the captive herself. For once, Guinan isn't a source of ineffable wisdom, but an individual with an emotional response that may not be the healthiest response to the situation. There's a great scene late in the episode, after she goes to see Hugh, when Guinan visits Picard's quarters and directly asks him to convince her they're doing the right thing. The reason this episode largely works is due to moments like that, which admit that whatever choice they make, Picard and the others will be losing something: either they destroy the Borg and lose a piece of their humanity, or they let Hugh go unharmed, and risk feeling responsible every moment for the rest of their lives whenever they hear some new Borg atrocity.

In the end Picard meets with Hugh himself, in another great scene (and really the best in the whole ep): he pretends that he's Locutus, and tells Hugh that it's time to assimilate Geordi and the others. Hugh objects, even going so far as to refer to himself in the singular first person, and at that point, for Picard, it's really not a choice anymore. The only decision is whether or not to return Hugh to his own kind, or to try and protect him and let him foster his newfound individuality. Hugh, realizing that the Borg would never stop hunting for him, opts to go back, which isn't not a huge surprise. It is sad, though, since odds are the Borg will download his consciousness into the hive mind and then erase it. But that's also where the hope lies: Picard theorizes that in those brief seconds when "Hugh" is available to the entire collective, every single Borg will taste what it is like to be an individual. Only for a moment, sure, but who knows what effect it might have.

This one works, largely for the reasons outlined above; and it also makes me like *First Contact* a little less, because Hugh certainly doesn't bring up a Borg Queen. (Also, I have a hard time accepting that Picard is still so pissed off about the Borg that he needs a guest actor to lecture him about *Moby Dick*.) I do think it cheats in making Hugh so sympathetic so quickly, but I appreciate the core concepts here, and overall, they were well-handled. The Borg may be a bit less scary after this, but let's be honest; they stopped being terrifying as soon as they were handily defeated in "Best of Both Worlds." This just leaves us with more stories to tell, and who isn't a fan of that?

Grade: A-

Stray Observations:

- Surprised that Data wasn't more a part of this episode. The contrast between him and Hugh might've been interesting.

- From what little I know of the rest of *TNG*, I don't think we ever get much more in the way of answers about the Borg. Which is too bad; once you get past the creeps, they really are fascinating, although I can't imagine they're all that easy to write for.
- So, that look Hugh gives Geordi right before he transports away with the other Borg—did that mean his consciousness survived the downloading?

"The Next Phase"

Or The One Where Geordi And Ro Find The Vanishing Point

Oh, I like this kind of episode. It doesn't give me a ton to discuss, but I love it when *TNG* takes off its serious hat and wades in, knuckles bared, for some serious ass-kicking sci-fi pulp. Oh sure, there's some serious talk here about death, and about how we mourn the people we care about after they've left us, but that's entirely secondary to a story that has Geordi and Ro running around the *Enterprise*, invisible, desperate to find away to phase back into step with everyone else before the Romulans succeed in destroying the ship. This is suspenseful, beautifully constructed, and well-paced through out. We get some more quality time with Ro Laren, and Geordi gets to be completely competent and charming. At one point, Geordi shoves a guy through a wall and sends him floating out into space to die. It is totally hard-core.

Sometimes I think the *Enterprise* spends half its time flying through space with its chin out. How else to explain the set-up for "Phase": they find a Romulan ship in serious trouble (this happens even before the episode begins), and Riker and a few others beam over to try and help. There are some technical problems and the ship's engine gets ejected before it explodes, but the real important part here is that when Geordi and Ro beam back to the *Enterprise* with a piece of Romulan equipment that Geordi needs to fix in tow, there's a transporter malfunction, and the two are seemingly killed. The ep keeps this illusion up for a while, everyone doing their jobs with slightly grimmer expressions than usual—that engine jettisoning I mentioned happens before Ro re-appears on the bridge, and even though it has nothing really to do with the overall plot, is an exciting scene. As we've seen before on the show, the *Enterprise* crew is very good at doing their jobs in the face of tragedy. It sometimes seems off to me, just how good they are at it, considering how rare it is for anyone to die on the series; I have complete faith in the professionalism of Picard and the others, of course, but death looks like such a rarity in their lives that you'd think it would be more difficult for them to shake it off. But maybe that's just one of the benefits of living in an enlightened society, who am I to judge?

Besides, this isn't what I was getting at when I joked about the ship leading with its chin. Nor was I referring to Ro and Geordi's reappearance. Once Ro realizes that no one can see her, she can pass through solid objects, and everyone assumes she's dead, she decides that death is as good an explanation as any, and gets this mystical, peaceful look on her face as she tries to make peace with everyone she's left behind. Geordi's having none of this, however, and despite Ro's objections, he's determined to figure out what happened, and find some way to restore them both to their natural state. You could say this is some kind of argument between science and faith; Geordi refuses to accept what he sees without testing it, while Ro simply believes it at face value. And I like seeing it that way, because the skeptic gets to be right for once. As well, the whole ep is a subtle critique of Ro's beliefs; not only is she wrong about being "dead," she is shocked when Data's idea of a proper memorial service for his supposedly dissipated co-workers is a party-life affair where Riker plays trombone and everyone's laughing. So it works as an atheist's fable, although that's never intrusive or strident. The moral being, if Geordi had followed Ro's idea, they would've wound up dead, and so would everyone else on board the *Enterprise*.

And that's what I meant about sticking their chin out and begging someone to take a swipe. Because it turns out the Romulans, who Picard and the others were so keen on helping, are, in fact, evil, like nearly every other Romulan

we've see on the series. Worf is the only one with any reservations about allowing them access to the *Enterprise's* computers, and Riker agrees with him, but he's get kind of an indulgent smile on his face, like, "Oh that Worf. Always such a paranoid nut. I think I'll keep him." Worf's right, though, although not right enough to realize that the Romulans are sabotaging the *Enterprise's* engines so that the next time the ship goes into warp, it will become a horrendous space kerblooey. Ro and Geordi hear the two main baddies discussing their plan, and we move into phase two: now, not only is it important for our heroes to get back in phase with everyone else before they starve to death (a concept the ep only really addresses after everything's been resolved), they've now got to do it before the ship moves on to its next destination.

Ron Moore's script isn't the best he's done for the show, for reasons I'll get to in a moment, but it is really, really good, and through much of the episode, I found myself grinning to ear to ear. It's just built so nicely, starting us with one obvious danger (the Romulan ship is going to explode!) before moving to a mystery (what happened to Geordi and Ro?). Once Geordi and Ro's dilemma is established, we spent time watching them struggle with what happened, establishing the rules of their strange condition (they can pass through objects, but not each other, no one else can hear them), and allowing a few scenes spent on them spying on their friends and fellow crew-members reacting to their deaths. But just as we're getting relaxed—Geordi is on the case, and we know he'll find an answer soon enough—we learn about the Romulan plot, and the race is on. And if that wasn't enough to get us worried again, we quickly learn that Geordi and Ro aren't as alone as they thought they were; there's a Romulan who is phased as well, and it's his job to make sure the *Enterprise* sabotage goes off without a hitch.

This is just really smart writing, and while "Phase" lacks the depth of the series' greatest hours, it's a lot of fun to watch. None of the various threads that run through the episode ever get old; I thought maybe we'd spend too much time dealing with the reaction to Geordi and Ro's "deaths," but while we do get some scenes of Data planning that memorial service, it never wears out its welcome. Data and Worf talk some about death (I love watching Data and Worf hang out; it's maybe one of my favorite pairings on *TNG*, because they complement each other well), and Riker has plans to speak about Ro during the service, which unsurprisingly fascinates the hell out of Ro, and that's largely it. I'm not sure I'd use this specific episode if I wanted to hook someone on the series, but this is the kind of sharp, gratifyingly solid work that helps support *TNG's* more ambitious eps. It's just a neat adventure story, and you need those once in a while.

That said, I do have a reservation or two. Actually just one, and it's that chin thing. (Man, of all the jokes for me to repeat...) I appreciate that the Romulans have to be involved with this. The reason Geordi and Ro "disappear" is that the Romulans have been working on a device that would combine an inverter and a cloaking device, rendering them essentially undetectable for however long they want to be. The device malfunctions, our heroes are caught in the crossfire, and there you have it. But the fact that the Romulans are once again setting the *Enterprise* up for a fall has the unfortunate by-product of making Picard and the others look naive and overly trusting. It's not like there's any sort of surprise in the idea that the Romulans would be creeps. Apart from Worf's precautions, nobody really worries that much about what the Romulans might be up to, and while you need that ignorance in order to increase the tension in Geordi and Ro's efforts, I wish this could've been managed in a way that didn't make everyone else seem a bit foolish. Maybe if it was all some accident that only Geordi grasped the ramifications of, it might've worked better. Although that would've meant losing the chase scene with the phased Romulan, and the totally cool moment when Geordi shoves him through the outer wall of the ship. Hm.

Generally, though, this was very fun, and a great change of pace after the more serious "I, Borg." It all culminates, as of course it had to culminate, at Geordi and Ro's memorial, as the two of them desperate try and get Data's attention by spreading chroniton particles. (It makes sense in context.) It's a great note to end everything on—two friends presumed dead appear first as ghosts, and then full on in the flesh. Reminds me a little of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and there are worse associations to have. The bad guys are thwarted, the good guys are saved, and we even

have time for a short grace note at the end, with Ro contemplating the implications of their experience while Geordi wolfs down his second (or third, or fourth) dinner. Not every episode has to end in tears, and it's swell to see everything wrap up with a minimum of heartbreak.

Grade: A-

Stray Observations:

- "Oh please, not the death chant."
- There is a surprising amount of hugging in this episode. The future is an odd place sometimes.

Next week: We finally get to "The Inner Light," and close out the fifth season with "Time's Arrow: Part I."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Inner Light"/"Time's Arrow, Part I"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[5/12/11 10:00AM](#)

"Time's Arrow, Part I"

Or The One Where Data Finds His Head

It's funny, sometimes, how a show can learn all the wrong lessons from its successes. And by "funny," I mean, "irritating as heck." No one is denying that "The Best of Both Worlds" was a brilliant hour and a half of television. After an increasingly self-assured third season, *TNG* upped its game in impressive fashion with one of the best cliffhangers in the history of genre TV; and whether or not the resolution lived up to the reveal of Picard as "Locutus," on the whole, it was as well-crafted a two-parter as one could hope to have. It was an event which, for once, fully managed to justify its status as something special and distinctive, as opposed to simply existing because the show's creative team decided they wanted to goose ratings. This was a story that needed more than just a single episode to tell, given its scope and its subject, and its popularity, and lingering impact on the *Trek* universe, were both richly deserved.

Which makes it all the more unfortunate, then, that instead of taking this clear demonstration of the heights the series was capable of as an inspiration to keep striving, *TNG* has apparently decided that two part episodes—more specifically, two part episodes in which part one serves as a season finale, making the cliffhanger conclusion all the more teeth-gnashingly frustrating for fans—are less a form to be saved for the kind of plots that deserve them, and more something that has to be pulled out every year, whether or not the writing is good enough to support the extra focus. We've already dealt with the fall-out from this. While "Unification" certainly deserved extra focus because of its guest star, Leonard Nimoy, the two-episode structure led to an inordinate amount of padding, and a storyline which felt lumpy and distracted, less than the sum of its most effective parts. Another part of the problem here is

also the show's on-going struggle with serialization; a rebellion within the Romulan empire is the kind of concept that's too big for a single episode, but also too nebulous and slow-moving to support a two-episode structure. Compare "Unification" with the long-form disintegration of the Klingon empire which played out over two seasons. The Klingon mythos wasn't perfect, but it helped create a much stronger sense of the show being larger than it really was. "Unification" just made the Romulans look a little more ridiculous.

It's too early to tell just what "Time's Arrow" will look like when it's finished, but after watching "Part I," my hopes are not high. We've got time travel here, a trope which *TNG* has handled ably before, but one which can lead to all kinds of confusion and lazy writing when mishandled. We've got two cliffhangers: Data's apparent death in the general sense, and Picard and the others sudden disappearance in the more specific. We've got potential back-story for Guinan, although I'm less excited about that than I once was. We've got a lot of terrible fish-out-of-water comedy. And we've got some actual honest-to-god monsters, which I'm generally a fan of, although they seem terribly confusing here. There are potentially interesting ideas floating throughout this episode, but hardly any of them really stick. While I hesitate to dismiss "Arrow" out of hand, seeing as how I haven't watched the second part yet, I don't think it's too out of bounds for me to suggest that this isn't anywhere near *TNG* at its (And then you wake up and you're someplace else

"The Inner Light"

Or The One Where Picard Takes The Longest Flute Lesson In History

No one's ever asked me why I care so much about genre fiction, despite being so regularly disappointed and frustrated by its myriad of false starts and failures, but if they did ask, I'd say that I'm fascinated by possibility. Science fiction, fantasy, even horror, appeal to me for any number of reasons, but the big one, the one that makes it so painful to see yet another clone of last year's—or last century's—hits trundle off the assembly line, is what the best stories can do to us when they don't have to pretend to be real. Admittedly, no fiction is ever "real" in the strictest sense, given its tendency to confirm the haphazard and fumbling exigencies of life into plot, but genre fiction doesn't have to bow its head to the grim dictates of common sense. Genre fiction, so long as it provides its audience with some small familiar core to hang on to, can do anything, create any world, violate any law. Gravity can be overcome, death can be denied, and time itself might bend or curve or even break, should an author require it. Great genre fiction—more to the point, great science fiction and fantasy—makes us reconsider the reality we take for granted, so simply and beautifully that we can never go back to where we thought we were.

Few shows ever strive for this, and fewer still achieve it. *TNG* has vacillated between ambitious, mind-bending stories and more traditional space opera fare, but while the series has had a great number of successes up to this point, "The Inner Light" still feels singular. It's an off-format episode; apart from a handful of scenes on the *Enterprise*, most of the episode has just a single regular cast member, and the emotional power of the episode comes entirely from this singular character's journey. Despite the initial set-up, there are no problems to be resolved here, and, apart from one brief scene, little in the way of danger. Of the story's two central crises, one solves itself, and the other turns out to have passed long ago. There are no action sequences; no striking alien designs; no sense of galactic import or epic doom. Well, maybe a little of the last—the story is, after all, structured around the slow death of an entire civilization. Except we only see a very small part of that civilization, and the point is less epic, and more personal. But we'll get to that.

As far as beginnings go, though, nothing marks "Light"'s cold open as particularly out of the ordinary. The *Enterprise* is exploring a sector, they find a probe that looks a bit like a lightning bolt, and Picard gets hit by some flashing light. He collapses, and when he wakes up, he's in a modest stone home somewhere, and a woman calls him Kamin and says how grateful he is that his fever broke. Picard is understandably non-plussed by this, and

tries every way he can think of to break the spell, or program, or illusion. So far, so normal. While getting knocked unconscious and mentally transported to an unfamiliar world may be an unusual event for us, for Picard, and most of his crew, this is practically a biweekly occurrence. *Trek* history is full of people waking up in strange places, with aliens who tell them "Huh? You've always been here! This is *totally* your beautiful house, wife, etc. Now come over here and explain to me the defense systems of this imaginary 'starship' you keep going on about, and then we can build us a rocket."

No, what makes "Light" so effective, and so striking, is the passage of time. Picard wakes up as Kamin, in what he eventually learns is Ressik, in the Northern Province of Kataan. The concerned woman at his side is Eline, Kamin's wife, and she's as kind and patient with Picard's questions as she can be, even though she doesn't seem to understand them. Picard goes for a walk in town, meets Council Leader Batai, and gets the general impression that wherever this place is (while they give him the name of the town and planet easily enough, it's not something that provides him with much context), it's full of terribly nice people. But that's often how it starts, isn't it? You don't get brain-napped, and find yourself surrounded by slaving psychopaths hell-bent on destroying everything you care about. Well, all right, that *can* happen, but like I said, so far, none of this is outside the range of our experience, *Trek*-wise.

"Light" cuts back to the bridge of the *Enterprise*, where Riker is attempting to assess the situation while Beverly and her assistant do their best to determine what's happened to the captain. I'd never seen this episode before this week, but I knew the premise; when I was a kid, a family friend had related the whole thing to me and my father one night, and it was such an amazing concept that it stuck with me ever since. Some shows are actually better appreciated this way, I think, like that episode of the '80s *Twilight Zone* about the box with the death-dealing button. Thankfully, "Light" is quite a bit better than "Button, Button," but I did manage to form my own conception of the ep over the years, and I was surprised that there were any cuts back to the *Enterprise* at all. I understand why they did it, at least on a functional level; it at least gives the rest of the cast *some* reason to show up for work (though Troi is absent, probably because she might've been able to figure out what was happening too soon, I guess), and, more importantly, it helps us jump forward in time whenever we return to Picard-Kamin after seeing the "real" Picard passed out on the bridge.

At one point, Riker has Geordi and Data break the stream of energy that's passing from the probe into Picard, in an attempt to disrupt whatever hold the probe has on the captain. It goes poorly, and back on Kataan, Picard-Kamin suffers something that looks quite a bit like a heart attack, only recovering when Riker lets the energy beam get back to its business. This is the only contact between Picard and his crew for nearly the entire episode, and certainly the only time Riker and the others are able to inflict any sort of change on whatever's happening. Traditionally, in this sort of story, Geordi and Data would've made every effort to figure out some way to circumvent whatever was holding Picard in its sway. While Picard pushed the boundaries of his mental prison, the rest of his crew would go through a trial and error process until finally, through some combination of luck and ingenuity, both storylines would meet up, and Picard would force his way free with the help of the others.

That doesn't happen here. After they block the beam once, and Picard nearly dies, Riker essentially gives up try. Actually, that's not quite right—it's more that there really isn't enough time for him to find and attempt another solution, because, on their end, Picard is only unconscious for twenty-five minutes. As well, on Picard-Kamin's end, instead of obsessively continuing his quest to get back to his real life, Picard eventually gives in to the evidence of his senses and accepts that Ressik is where he belongs; that Eline is truly his wife; and that no matter how many times he views the stars in the night sky and feels a pang of longing, there's nowhere else for him to go. And the pang fades, as such pangs always do eventually. Over the years-

Yeah, that's a big concept right there. Let's not rush by this. What truly distinguishes "Light" from every other episode of this sort is its understanding of the concept of time. Picard doesn't spend twenty-five minutes as Kamin.

He doesn't spend twenty five hours, or days, or weeks. Picard lives somewhere in the area of forty years as Kamin, and in that time, he fell in love with his wife, had a daughter and a son, and the daughter grew old enough to marry and have her own child. In this time, Picard invests in his community, and watches the encroaching signs of destruction as drought begets drought, and the sun begins to die. And then the people of Kataan launch their probe, and the ghosts of Kamin's past explain to him how all he has seen is their attempts to pass on their culture to a stranger, someone who'll remember them long after they are gone. And then Picard wakes up on the bridge, in his old uniform, his young(er) body, and all the friends he spent so many decades putting behind him staring at him in concern. He's been gone to them for less than half an hour.

I suppose I could find points to criticize here. The culture of Kataan is never specifically defined, and sometimes comes off more as a New Age paradise than a specific place in need of being remembered. By the end of the ep, all really know about Eline and Batai and their people is they're terribly pleasant, and they have ceremonies for their children. Oh, and they have schools, because Kamin's son drops out to be a musician. And of course, there's the flute that Picard spends so much of the episode learning to play. As well, I'm not entirely sure it works to the episode's benefit to have the cuts back to the *Enterprise* at all. It would've been possible to indicate the passage of time in other ways, and the story works best if we're locked into the same mystery as Picard. It smacks a little of the writers backing down from the strength of their premise, trying to make it more user-friendly by reminding us occasionally that, yes, Riker and the others haven't been written off the show, and Picard will be back in the red and black soon enough.

But those cuts represent maybe a tenth of the overall episode, and my resistance to them could very well be the fact that I've spent so long with an imagined version of "Light" in my head. As for the supposed blandness of the Kataan people... I don't care, and I don't think it matters that much, because we're not here for a history lesson. Besides, the probe the Kataanese send out is designed for one use, on one person. (How lucky are they that it discovered Picard? Can you think of anyone else capable of surviving an experience like this without losing his mind? Between this and the Borg, Jean Luc is officially a super-human.) They're not trying to bring the ways of Kataan back to the universe. No single probe could encapsulate an entire race, and entire world. Not even forty years would be enough to pass on a whole civilization.

What possible memorial could serve for the lives lost, for the way of life forever destroyed? Perhaps nothing more than to let someone somewhere know that there was a place once, and the people in it loved and were loved, and then they died. The specifics aren't important. Sometimes, just knowing there was beauty, and that it is lost, is enough, and in the end, all that's left are some memories, and a flute, and a single line of melody. Also, the lesson that the most important time is the time we have, and our only true duty to ourselves and those we love is to make the most of it. "Light" is an expertly constructed episode, one that ably demonstrates the potential of genre fiction to astonish us and move us in equal measure. And it manages to be beautiful, hopeful, and devastating all in a single final scene.

Grade: A+

Stray Observations:

- Patrick Stewart is just amazing in this. The episode wouldn't work without an absolutely tremendous actor at its center, and, as always, Stewart delivers.
- This was the first *TNG* episode to win the Hugo Award for Dramatic Presentation.
- Man, Meribor looked an awful lot like Debbie Gibson.) best.

Evidence has been discovered of the existence of extra-terrestrials on Earth from waaaay back in the past. The *Enterprise* is called into investigate, most likely because one of the pieces of evidence discovered is Data's

head, which surely he'd be interested in examining. And it is his head, as an examination back on the ship soon determines, which makes everyone depressed because, well, losing one's head is not a great indicator of longevity for anyone. Data seems to be only person not bothered by this discovery; as he explains to Geordi, he appreciates the knowledge that he is mortal, as he believes that this makes him more human. This isn't a bad concept to explore, but the sight of Data's head is so odd, and the circumstances under which it's found so puzzling, that it's hard to take any of the discussions seriously.

Because really, if you found a friend's head buried five miles under San Francisco, and you learned that it had been there for five centuries, well, I'm betting your first reaction wouldn't be "Oh my god, [friend] is going to die!" Obviously at some point you'd be concerned (especially since he still owes you that twenty bucks from Comic Con), but I think the initial, "What the hell is going on?" response would take precedence. Sure, the *Enterprise* has dealt with time travel before, and I suppose you could say they're clinging to the most easily graspable concept in the middle of all the crazy, but it still comes across as awkward, and, justifiable or not, more than a little like padding.

While all this discussion is going on, the *Enterprise* heads off to Devidia II to investigate the situation still further. There they find a glowing pool and, at least according to Troi, a whole lot of people trapped and in agony. There are life forms on the planet, but they're just a second or two out of phase with the *Enterprise* away team. There are ways to deal with this, but the only person who can do the necessary calculations fast enough is Data, whom Picard had ordered to stay aboard the ship to try and avoid the whole time travel, head-loss problem. But of course Data winds up on the planet anyway, and he phases in with the aliens, who are glowing and freaky and have this big snake that they're feeding. Then Data goes through a glowing doorway, and winds up in San Francisco, to 1893.

If "Time's Arrow" had been lumpy but inoffensive to this point, once Data shows up on Earth in the 19th century, things get actively painful, as we're forced to deal with scene out of scene of unfunny, draggy fish-out-of-water comedy. It's not as bad as Lwaxana, thankfully, and Spinner's straight-forward straight-man performance always helps take some of the bite out of the worst jokes. But again, none of the characters he meets, not the comic drunk or the comic bellboy, are setting the world on fire. There's something of a "City on the Edge of Forever" vibe here, as Data quickly focuses his efforts on trying to put together some kind of machine. (There's also the fact that 19th century San Francisco looks just as much a set as 1930's New York did in "City.") But since Data is alone, he's forced to play off the locals for conversation, and it's just a whole pile of not much fun.

Then Data sees Guinan's photo in the newspaper, so he heads off to see her—only she doesn't know him. Yet. Ah, time travel. Our Guinan had made some comments earlier, most notably to Picard, that suggested this sort of thing might happen, and from what she says to Data, there's definitely a story here; she doesn't seem at all bothered by his appearance, even though she doesn't specifically recognize him, and she asks him if her father sent him to bring her back. Who knows what's going on there, and considering how little we still know about Guinan, it would be nice to find out some more about her past. Yet her interactions with Samuel Clemens, aka Mark Twain (Jerry Hardin, aka Deep Throat from *The X-Files*) are wince-inducing, and the knowledge that Clemens will be back for part two fills me with dread. Yes, we get it, it's fun to write pseudo-witty things for Twain to say, and we all like to see famous people in time travel stories, don't you know. But it doesn't work.

Truth is, not much of this does. Some of it's boring and irritating, and some of it is very creepy and weird, but so creepy and weird that it almost doesn't really belong in a *TNG* episode. Really, this feels more than a little like a *Doctor Who* script that's been edited to fit a larger cast. There's the time travel, of course, but the bizarre alien menace also has a very *Who* feel to it, particularly the scene where a well-dressed couple shots the drunk Data met earlier in the episode with some special weapon, draining him or freezing him or something. At the end of part I, Picard and the others finally get a glimpse of the glowing monsters, and that freaky snake thnig, and then they pass through to follow Data back to 1893. As cliffhangers go, this is weak sauce. The mysteries of whether or not Data

will be killed, and just what the hell those glowing creatures are up to, are intriguing, but given how slipshod "Arrow" was, I find myself not all that interested in what happens next. But I suppose I'll find out eventually.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- This wasn't a great episode, but I have to love a show that can casually throw out lines like, "Yeah, we found Data's head five miles beneath San Francisco."

Next Week: All right, announcement time. I can officially confirm that I'll be covering *Deep Space Nine*, so y'all can stop bugging me about it. For right now, I'm planning on starting *DS9* after I've finished *TNG*, even though the two ran concurrently. If you think this is a horrible mistake, please let me know in the comments. Next week, we'll be looking at the first *TNG* movie, *Star Trek: Generations*. See you then!

[Star Trek: Generations](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[5/19/11 10:00AM](#)

Re-watching *Star Trek: Generations* for the first time in three years, two things soon became apparent to me:

1. Data's emotion chip is a horrible idea.
2. So is nearly everything else in this movie.

It's strange. Like I said, it's been a few years since I last watched this (Netflix conveniently marks the date as sometime in March '08, which would've been about a month after I wrote my first ever review for the *A.V. Club*, and now I feel old), and I remembered it was deeply mediocre. But when I watched the opening scenes this week, with Kirk, Scotty, and Chekov serving as honorary chaperones for the new *Enterprise-B*'s (with captain Alan Ruck!) maiden voyage, I wondered if I'd been off in that assessment. Maybe *Generations* was due for a re-examination. Sure, Kirk dies a dull, flat death, but maybe that works. I was prepared to mount the sort of defense Whedonites often bust out during arguments about the later seasons of *Buffy*: Sure, this was dreary and kind of grim and deflating, but that's how life works, after all, and that's what great drama is about, and isn't it refreshing, then, to see the hero of a pulpy TV series and big screen franchise die like the overweight, tired old man he really is? Isn't it—

Yeah, I didn't get very far with that line of reasoning. (I'm also not a big fan of the later seasons of *Buffy*.) But my point is that, watching those opening scenes, I could almost see myself making that argument work. The beginning of *Generations* isn't high art, but it's credible enough. Yes, it's contrived that Ruck immediately panics in the face of danger, when the *Enterprise-B* finds two El-Aurian refugee ships stuck in a strange energy ribbon, and turns to Kirk for help. And, okay, I'm not sure I buy that after saving as much of the day as he can from the bridge, Kirk volunteers to go to main engineering to jerry-rig some doohickey, just in time to get sucked out of the ship when the

energy beam rips a hole in the hull. I mean, there are a dozen other people on the bridge, all of them (excluding Scotty) in much better health than Kirk, and it does seem like an ability to run for more than ten feet without getting winded might be useful here. Also, Guinan turns out to be one of the forty-seven people the *Enterprise-B* manages to beam off the refugee ships. Because Dr. Soran (Malcolm McDowell) was also one of the forty-seven rescued, and he's going to be our villain later on, and we'll need someone to explain who he is, as well as explain the crazy energy ribbon which caused all the trouble. Explaining is what Guinans do best, I guess.

It's not an amazing start to the movie, but it feels like a *Trek* movie, and the little we see of the characters, they're behaving as we've become accustomed to see them behave. Then we jump ahead eighty years, and everything goes to hell.

And quickly, too. The first scene we get with the *TNG* crew is on the holodeck. Everyone's done up in naval uniforms, they're on an old-fashioned ship, and Worf is being promoted to Lieutenant Commander. The group is real chummy, right up till the moment that Riker "accidentally" drops Worf in the ocean. The ensemble laughs while Worf sputters and rages, and Data asks Beverly Crusher what the joke is. She tries to explain, with the end result being that Data, in an attempt to replicate the original humor, pushes her in the water as well. This is greeted with stony silence. Then Picard gets a message from Starfleet, looks terribly upset, and we're moving to the next scene.

I don't want to spend too much time on this, but it is fairly indicative of the problems the movie on the whole has with translating its small screen heroes to big screen, larger than life stars. The original franchise never really had this problem; the central trio, Kirk, Spock, and McCoy, were strong enough that, even in the worst films of the franchise, they held their own (they weren't always *good*, mind you, but you never questioned they should be on a movie screen), and the rest of the crew filled in the spaces around them quite nicely. Here, though, while the actors are game enough, there's no central relationship holding everything together, no trio to focus our attention. Of the *TNG* cast, the two who make the biggest impression are Picard and Data, and they only share one scene of any significance together. (It's one of the movie's best scenes, too.) *TNG* benefits as a series from having a much stronger sense of ensemble than the original show, but the movie doesn't bring that across. We know who Picard is, we know Data and Geordi are friends, and everyone else just sort of melds together in a vague, affable blur.

Well, theoretically "affable," anyway. Here, they just come off like a bunch of smug jerks. The promotion sequence is cute enough, and helps show the sense of camaraderie that *TNG* did so well, but Riker's prank on Worf doesn't come off as friendly. It comes off as the cool kids mocking the outsider. These are our heroes? A bunch of smarmy creeps, picking on a minority? Not to mention how Data's apparently still struggling with the concept of "slapstick," despite having access to a thousand years worth of writing and examples to draw from. I understand wanting to introduce Data's "otherness" quickly, but this makes him stupid, not different, and when he throws Beverly into the water, there's a strange Frankenstein's monster vibe that doesn't really suit him. The rest of the crew's astonished horror at his behavior makes them even less likable than before, because honestly, what *is* the difference between embarrassing Worf and dunking Beverly? Beverly stays pissed off at Data for days, too; considering the small amount of screentime the character gets, this does her no favors, as she has no real reason to be angry, beyond the fact that she needs to be angry to motivate Data to finally install his emotions chip.

Sigh. Let's just skip over the chips origins on the TV series (we've seen it introduced in "Brothers," but in regular *TNG* coverage, we haven't gotten to the point where Data gets it back from Lore)(um, spoiler alert, I guess?), and talk about how it works in the movie. It doesn't. On a character level, it's a horrible choice. I can see the writers (Brannon Braga and Ron Moore did the screenplay, and Rick Berman contributed to the story) wanting to throw it in as a sop to fans, the supposed culmination of Data's seven season long journey towards humanity. After all, this is the big screen, and if there was any time to pull out the stops, now is that time. But that means sacrificing what makes Data unique, and what makes him so compelling. Data is always the most interesting when the show

successfully managed to portray his attempts at finding a soul without resorting to "What is kiss?" type moments. He's at his best when his mechanical origins make him what we aspire to be, even while he wishes he could be less.

I suppose, with the emotion chip installed, this still could've been the case. A Data struggling with a rush of new emotions could've been just as unusual and dramatic as the emotion-free Data. (Although, as others have noted, this is a shortcut that does a disservice to the years of growth Data's gone through on his own, providing him with an easy fix for a problem that really should've been solved within.) Or maybe this concept was doomed to failure from the start; a person overcome by passions they don't understand is basically a teenager, and despite years of TV shows and young adult lit to the contrary, teenagers aren't all that interesting. Whether or not this *could've* worked, though, is irrelevant. It *doesn't* work. Brent Spiner is, as we've seen time and again, deeply creepy when he tries to play up Data's "human" side, and, despite the fact that Data is one of the show's most inherently likable figures, his film debut is flat out horrible. He comes off as a shrieking, gibbering lunatic, a Lovecraftian shambles dressed up as comic relief. Am I overstating? Probably. Data isn't bad at all in his one big scene with Picard, as he deals with the realization that having emotions doesn't necessarily mean controlling them. But that's one scene. The rest is just... awful. I hated Data in *Generations*, wincing nearly every time he came on screen. And that is just no fun at all.

Picard is better served, but still problematic. Patrick Stewart is a better actor than Spiner, and the script doesn't call on him to behave as wildly out of character as Spiner is forced to, and yet there are a few scenes that even Stewart's talents can't entirely save. The standard, accepted contrast between Kirk and Picard has always been that Kirk is the more forceful, aggressive captain, while Picard is more thoughtful and taciturn. (I've brought this up more than a few times myself.) But *Generations*, intentionally or not, goes out of its way to make Picard seem weak and soft-hearted. We see him maybe five minutes before he gets the news about his brother and nephew (burned to death in a fire), and ten, twenty minutes later he's sobbing to Troi about their deaths, bemoaning all that the now dead Rene (nephew) won't get to experience. It's clearly supposed to be moving, and Stewart sells it with all he has, which is much to his credit. But the speech is shallow, and unconvincing. It reads more like a Hallmark commercial than honest grief.

Picard is supposed to be taking the mantle from Kirk in *Generations*, and instead, he's sobbing over characters which most of the audience have never seen before—and even if you've been watching the TV show from the beginning, it's not like we've had many opportunities to get emotionally invested in Rene or Robert. For a someone who's at his best when he's thinking through a problem, Picard's grief is too much. He's just too broken. Compare this to, say, Kirk's reaction to Spock's death, and Picard looks like a show-boating ninny. (And really, having his relations "burned to death" is incredibly cheap. The death is made intentionally horrible to try and goose our response; even if we don't give a rat's ass about the ones who died, "burning to death" is an inherently horrible way to go.) All of this is done to give him more of a reason to want to stay in the Nexus when the time comes, but it's unnecessary. It takes hardly any effort at all for Picard to get away from his "ideal life," and there's certainly no catharsis between his earlier grief and the later sequence. Despite being arguably the film's central character, Jean-Luc hardly makes an impression, and that's because of muddled choices like this.

Then there's the plot. The core idea is... not terrible. Soran, the gentleman we met during the opening sequence, is basically crazy. He lost his family to a Borg attack (ah, the Borg), and those brief moments he spent stuck in the energy ribbon—which is the Nexus mentioned above, a place which provides absolute peace and joy to anyone under its influence—were, as far as we can tell, the only happiness he's experienced since the death of everyone he loved. So in the eighty years since that opening sequence, Soran has been doing everything possible to get back to the ribbon, finally coming up with a plan that involves the destruction of multiple stars in order to shift the path of a ribbon onto a planet where he can get back inside. He can't just fly into it in a ship, you see, because the ribbon destroys any ship that comes too near it, and-

Okay, maybe "not terrible" is stretching, because already, I've got some problems with this. As much as I like Malcolm McDowell (and I do!), Soran is ill-defined. Apart from a few hammy lines about time being a "fire" that destroys everything (a line which had me flashing on that awful *Firestarter* made-for-TV sequel McDowell starred in, the ads for which had him intoning, "Some say the world will end in fire," etc), and the backstory we get from Guinan (sigh), we're not given sufficient cause to understand an individual willing to kill millions just to get back to his happy place. The pursuit of paradise is a goal anyone can grasp, but the cost here is extraordinarily high, especially considering that, since we see Kirk residing happily in the Nexus later on, it's not like Soran couldn't have just flown a shuttlecraft into the ribbon, and who cares if the craft was destroyed. Or, hell, why not just beam himself directly inside? Admittedly, neither of these methods is entirely foolproof, but we're never given a clear enough sense of Soran's desperation for him to rise above just another one-note, sneering villain. He has a relationship with the Klingon Duras sisters, because he needs their help to get the material he needs to blow up the stars to shift the ribbon, and it all seems like it should be interesting, but it isn't. At one point, he tortures Geordi, because, I dunno, I guess that's a thing.

The Nexus itself isn't all that compelling, either. It's just this vague space thingie that we've never heard about, the sort of "Eh, magic" sci-fi crap which *TNG* largely eschewed in its best seasons. Apart from giving Soran a motivation, and providing Kirk with a chance to prove one more time how he'll sacrifice anything for the sake of "making a difference," it's useless. Why does it give you your heart's desire? Where do you go when you're pulled inside it? There are no consequences to the perfection it provides, which presumably makes Kirk's (and, to a lesser extent, Picard's) sacrifice more meaningful, but also makes the Nexus itself horribly unspecific. I'm not asking for a twenty minute discourse on its origins, but at least give it some reason to exist beyond simply, "Well, we had to have *something*, eh?" Remember the probe in *Star Trek IV*? On one level, it's basically just a MacGuffin to force the *Enterprise* crew to travel back in time. But at least, even in the little we know about it, it's clear it has a purpose: it's a probe that communicates with whales. We don't know why, and we have no idea what the whale eventually says back ("These assholes murdered all of my kind, so feel free to waste the lot of them."), but at least that's *something*. The Nexus is that laziest of MacGuffins, the sort that doesn't even bother to pretend its anything but a distraction. Which is both insulting and tedious.

After a complicated series of events (some of which involve Data—shudder—grinning), the *Enterprise* ends up in orbit around Veridian III, the planet Soran intends the ribbon to pass through once he finishes his sun-destroying. While Picard trades himself as a hostage for Geordi (um, why? Oh forget it), beaming himself down to the planet to confront Soran directly, the Klingon Bird of Prey that transported the bad doctor squares off against the *Enterprise*, using a secret camera installed in Geordi's VISOR to find out the *Enterprise*'s shield frequency. I like space battles well enough, but this is grafted on; whether or not the *Enterprise* defeats the Klingons isn't anywhere near as important as whether or not Picard can stop Soran from launching the final missile and destroying the sun. The ship-to-ship combat is exciting in theory, with lots of tense faces and twists, and hey, the saucer ends up crash-landing on Veridian III, but... well, it feels mostly like like this is a scene put in the movie because this is a *Star Trek* film, so of course it has to have photon torpedoes and so forth. (I think we've seen the shot where Klingons stare in frozen horror through their view screen as a torpedo hones in on them at least three times before in this franchise.)

Which isn't to say the climax on the planet is much better. I'm not sure what the ideal finale of a *Trek* movie should have, but I can say with reasonable confidence that it shouldn't have two near senior citizens squabbling over a bunch of rocks. There's nothing visually exciting here, the fight choreography is understandably limited, and it goes on for ages. The fact that Picard loses the fight the first time through is, admittedly, very clever. I've seen this movie too many times now to know how I first reacted to it, and any savvy audience member would've realized that the story wasn't quite at the end yet, since Picard and Kirk hadn't met up, but I'd like to think it was at least a little surprising when Soran's plan succeeds. And then Picard wakes up in the Nexus, and we find his perfect life is

apparently a Charles Dickens Christmas, where Renee is still alive (and younger than he was when he died, I think), and Picard's wife has been pumping out the kids in earnest.

I'm neutral on this. Idealized fantasy worlds are almost always bland in fiction, and, as mentioned above, it's not like Picard's emotional journey is of much interest here anyway. Echo Guinan shows up to explain the situation, and give Picard the hilarious news that, if he wants to leave the Nexus, he can return to any time and any place. Because, y'know, Space Heaven wasn't convenient enough as a device, so now it has to be capable of limitless travel. Picard realizes he's going to need help to fight Soran, because paradox dictates that he can only go back to a few moments before he... Wait. How does this work, exactly? Picard only went into the Nexus after Soran succeeded in blowing up the sun. So if he wants to stop Soran from blowing up the sun, he has to go back to a point before he entered the Nexus, which means that while he and Kirk are running around the rocks, there's another Picard lying down on the ground below. Who doesn't ever get to go into the Nexus, so I guess the present Picard ends up shooting him in the face after the battle is over, or something. Not to mention the fact that Picard isn't tempted even for a moment to go back far enough in time to warn his brother and nephew about the fire. Hell, Kirk's been missing for all these years, why not just send him back to the past—maybe a few months before, to the space station where the *Enterprise* finds Soran earlier in the film. Kirk can take Soran out then, and send a quick message to Picard's family, and Picard himself can go to his present without fear of bumping into himself.

Of course, there's that danger of paradox I mentioned, but it's not like Picard ever appears to consider any of this. (It's flat out absurd that he doesn't at least entertain the possibility of warning his relations.) And there's still the extra Picard that nobody ever mentions again, because I guess he just vanishes when the present Picard travels back in time. As if that weren't enough, there's another problem to all of this, one that kills the urgency of the finale, despite all the sweatiness and desperation: if Picard and Kirk do fail, then Soran will succeed same as before, the Nexus will hit the planet again, Picard and Kirk will get sucked inside—so they can repeat the process anew. The problem with Soran's plan is that once Picard's beamed down close enough to get into Nexus himself, he's won. All he has to do is keep going back in time and fighting till he gets it right.

As for Kirk's death, well, it's weak. The whole fight sequence is weak, and then Kirk dies by sliding a broken bridge down to the ground, where he's crushed, although not quite crushed enough to get a few final words out to Picard. (That he doesn't say, "Ship... out of danger?" is a goddamn crime.) This isn't the first version of Kirk's death the movie tried; originally, Soran shot James T. in the back, but then audiences didn't like that so much, and we got this instead. I'm doubtful the back-shooting would've been much of an improvement compared to what we got, but at least it would've been visually shocking. There's not much drama in this version, and it doesn't feel like an appropriate send off for a legend. In a better movie, that might've been on purpose, might've been a way of doing the character right; there's something melancholic in the idea of Kirk ending his days on some anonymous planet in a future he doesn't understand. (You could even ret-con his *Star Trek V* prediction to work with this—in a sense, he *does* die alone, since he has no friends here that he knows of.) But as is, it's just the ultimate example of how misguided this entire project was: you wait the entire movie to see Picard and Kirk team-up, and all they do is double team some crazy guy.

There's more to pick apart here, I'm sure, but I think it's best I leave it at this. *Generations* looks pretty enough, and it's not as egregiously awful as, say, *Star Trek V*. But it is lousy, and throughout, it shows a thorough inability to understand what audiences want in a good *Trek* movie. We don't want to see our favorite characters repeatedly humiliated and turned shrill (have I mentioned Data still has that frakin' emotion chip installed at the end of the movie? Normally I'd congratulate the writers for not hitting the reset button, but come *on*). We don't want to see subplots that have nothing to do with the main action. (I should've gotten into this more, but another issue with Data's emotion chip is that it's utterly extraneous to the rest of the film. There's no real attempts to connect it to the Soran story, apart from the fact that Data's "cowardice" lets Soran kidnap Geordi. That's not enough, and it's a clear

sign that the writers really didn't know what they were doing in bringing *TNG* to the big screen.) And we certainly don't want to have a 2-on-1 climax. (Um, so to speak.) This is just a waste from beginning to end, and for a group of actors who deserved much, much better. Here's hoping their next big screen outing will be an improvement.

Stray Observations:

- SPOILER: Yes, *First Contact* is a better movie than this, although I don't think it's flawless. I expect to be writing about it after I get through season six of *TNG*, and then punishing myself by doing *Insurrection* and *Nemesis* after season seven, before moving on to *DS9*.
- Dialog Class: Soran tells Picard, "I have an appointment with eternity, and I don't want to be late." The first half of this line is okay—cheesy, but Soran is a cheesy dude, and villains are always spouting crap like this. "I don't want to be late," on the other hand, is flat out horrid. It's not funny, it's not a pun, it's not a riff, it doesn't clarify or change the meaning of the initial statement. It's over-writing, plain and simple, and infuriating to me because it would be *so easy* to fix. Sorry. Just had to get that off my chest.
- I don't buy that Kirk's perfect life isn't on the *Enterprise*. That goes against just about everything we know about Kirk.
- The final words of James T. Kirk: "Least I could do for the captain of the Enterprise. It was... fun. Oh my."

Next week: After much soul-searching and discussions with my family ("What?", "Next who?", "I didn't know you wrote about *Star Wars*!", and "I'll call the cops if you come back here again."), I've decided to stick with *Next Generation* over the summer, instead of switching to another show. I'm really not that burnt out on the series, and it's easier for me to write about something I'm familiar with. (And I'm sure you'll understand that I'm feel very familiar with the *Trek*-verse by now.) Plus, the 1000+ comments on last week's review are nothing to sneeze at. So, be back here next Thursday, as we dive into the sixth season of *TNG* with "Time's Arrow, Part 2" and "Realm of Fear." Make it so!

SEASON SIX

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Time's Arrow, Part II"/"Realm Of Fear"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[5/26/11 10:00AM](#)

"Time's Arrow, Part II"

Or The One Where The Rumors Of Data's Death Turn Out To Be Greatly Exaggerated

I can't help but wonder if I'm being punished for something. Last week, I sat through *Star Trek: Generations*, but I was confident that I still loved this show enough to keep covering it without taking a break over the summer. Oh sure, it was tempting. Whenever Todd posts one of those articles about "New TV Club Classic," I feel like I'm getting picked last for the softball team or something. (Yes, I know this is stupid. Maybe that's where the punishment comes in?) I like new things, and y'know, I have been writing about *Trek* for a couple years now. Last time I had a break was when I covered *The Prisoner* for a couple months, when I was still writing about *TOS*. It's easy to get impressed by the amount of time I've invested, and to start dithering about how, hey, I want to do one of the *serious* shows, I don't wanna just be "the *Trek* guy." But really, I'm lucky to have what I have, to get to keep writing about a franchise I honestly do enjoy, and get paid for the privilege. There are much worse things than being "the *Trek* guy."

None of this was precisely on my mind when I sat down to endure "Time's Arrow, Part II," but I did begin the episode with the complacency of having made a decision that I believed was both easy and fundamentally sound. Within minutes, my beliefs were shaken. "Time's Arrow, Part I" was terrible; "Part II" is, amazingly, worse. It is, quite possibly, the worst episode of the show I've seen since the first season. Yes, worse than "Cost of Living." (Okay, it was better than "Shades of Grey," but I tend to skip that one, as it's a clip show, and shouldn't count.) And probably worse than a bunch of other episode I said were horrible. And you know Hitler? Totally worse than Hitler!

I—sorry. I'm a fan of Samuel Clemens, and I liked Jerry Hardin on *The X-Files*, but by the end of this ep, I wanted Hardin dead and Clemens to have never been born.

Well, okay, not really. I do quite like *Huckleberry Finn*. And in case this hasn't been made obvious by the sheer electronic tonnage of hyperbole I've unleashed in these pages (how can you have electric tonnage? Because my words are made of MAGIC), when I'm irritated or bored by a *TNG* episode, I tend to go overboard; if I didn't enjoy myself watching the ep, the least I can do is try to enjoy myself when I'm writing about it. "Arrow" is pretty bad, though, and Samuel Clemens is one of its biggest problems. What little narrative momentum the story manages to build stops dead whenever he comes on-screen; he's an irritating caricature who serves no purpose beyond padding out the running time in order to justify the two-part structure. Which is even more exasperating when you consider how much of this episode feels weirdly under-developed. I'm not sure it could've been saved by focusing more on the alien threat, or Picard and Guinan's "first" meeting, but at least those would've allowed more dramatic opportunity than Hardin's cackling, tedious whine did.

All right, let's try and get through this while we're all still young. Hey, remember how "Time's Arrow, Part I" ended in a cliffhanger, in which Picard, Riker, Troi, Geordi, and Beverly (I have no idea why I refer to some of these characters by their first names and some by their last, by the way) stepped into the glowing doorway, after seeing the freaky glowing snake monster? Well, if you guessed that doorway was similar to the one Data passed through (although it's not the same one, since they don't end up in the same place; I'm not sure why the aliens keep creating new doorways to slightly different time periods), you are correct. The away team arrives in San Francisco of the 19th century, where Data has put together a machine to try and track the aliens' movements, and Samuel Clemens has become obsessed with time travelers he believes are here to take over the world. This leads, unsurprisingly, to an awkward reference to *A Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur's Court*.

What's strange here is that "Arrow" doesn't actually pick up right after where "Time's" left off. We've actually jumped a few days ahead of when Picard and the others went back in time, as they've all managed to integrate themselves into San Franciscan society, in full costume and everything. I appreciate this in theory; screentime is at a premium, even in a two parter, and as we've already seen how Data had to work to get himself set up in the past, we don't really need to see Riker stealing a cop's uniform or Beverly applying to be a nurse. But the material chosen to replace this potentially tedious, but still story relevant exposition, is *The Adventures of Sam Clemens, General Irritant and All Around Busy Body*. A quarter of the episode or more is devoted to the man's attempts to expose the "conspiracy" which Data and the others represent, and it gets even more pointless when Clemens gets sucked into the future, and spends a whole scene just complaining about everything to Troi, only for Troi to carefully explain to him how wonderful her present really is. This serves no purpose; worse, it's dull, preachy, and thoroughly unentertaining. If Jeri Taylor (who's credited for the teleplay of this ep—she's also credited with "The Drumhead" and "Violations," among other episodes, which is quite the gamut) was going to be clever and throw us into the middle of the action, the least she could've done provided some action worth being thrown into.

And you know what? Maybe we *do* need to see Riker stealing that cop's uniform. At the very least, it would provide a stronger sense of continuity to a story that's painfully lacking in it. Everything in the episode is disjointed, a series of predictable gags masquerading as context: Picard and the others have rented a room from a comic Irish woman, and he tricks her into thinking they're an acting troupe. Ha ha. Except how did he get the room? I can come up with a somewhat plausible scenario, but this ep requires me, as the audience, to do too much of the legwork required to make it make sense. I'm not sure where the line is here; I think structures that shortcut through obvious set-ups can actually work wonders, especially if the writers in question don't have anything new to add to a particular scenario. (I doubt that anyone involved in this episode would've written a "Picard fakes his way into an apartment" scene that would really make you think.) And I certainly don't wish this had gone on longer. It's just, the

reality of this 19th century world wasn't all that real to begin with, and these jumps made it seem even more haphazard and slipshod.

Really, though, if the rest of the episode had worked, I doubt I'd be complaining much about this. It's more endemic of a larger problem to me, in that so much of "Arrow" seems haphazard and slipshod. It's possible to put together what's going on with the Devidians—they feed on neural energy, so they're travelling back in time to a point in Earth's history when the people they feed on can be dismissed as cholera victims. But there's no sense of an organization at work, no feel for the dead hundreds Troi senses back in the cave in part one, and no real urgency. There's nothing to match the eeriness of the scene in the last episode when a pair of well-dressed rich folk drained the life out of a drunk. As I said when I covered "Time's," stories that take this much time on a show need to actually be more important, or more complex, or more *something* than regular stories. (That's one of the problems with them, really. Too many "epic" plots, and epic stops being quite as special as it once was.) This had the pieces, but none of them paid off in any real way.

And what the hell was all that noise about Picard and Guinan? I think I'm supposed to be more invested in their friendship than I actually am; it's clearly intended as the emotional centerpiece of the ep (we don't ever "mourn" Data after his head blows off, since it's obvious Geordi's going to rebuild him; Clemens is the only other element that appears to be trying for a deeper response, and look how that turned out), because when Picard comes into Data's apartment and Guinan is there, everything gets really ponderous all of a sudden. Then later, after the confrontation with the Devidians in the cave that started all this mess, after everyone on the away team except Picard and Data's head have gone back to the future, Picard stays behind with Guinan to tend her injuries. They share some tender moments, and Stewart is obviously doing his best (Goldberg is fine, too), but for all the set-up, there's nothing really there to speak of. The time has passed for the show to make much effort in building Picard and Guinan's relationship, and its supposed "origin" here (which, as others have noted, is a disappointing resolution to all the hints we've had over the years as to how they met) is, while far from the worst scene in the ep, not much of anything at all.

Then there's the fact that Picard is able to program a coded binary message into Data's head with an iron filing. It's conceptually cool—while the message appears to transmit almost simultaneously to us, it takes five hundred years for the characters, in a way—but utterly ridiculous, to think that Picard would be capable of such delicate work with such a clumsy tool, and that Data's head would stay in mint enough condition for half a millennium to still retain that work. (I may be forgetting something from part one here. Maybe the cave was airtight or something? Still, I stand by the first part of that criticism.) Then there's the way Guinan refuses to tell Riker what to do when he asks her for advice after Picard is stranded in the past. She doesn't want to affect his decisions. Except, well, this *is* the present. And it's not like the decision is that complex. Is Picard still in the past, and if so, how can we get him back? Besides, how does Guinan know that her advice *wasn't* part of what happened? All she remembers is hanging out with Picard for a bit, and then he left. Oh, and she was probably still conscious when Clemens showed up, but it's not like he tells either of them, "Thank goodness your future self didn't provide us with any helpful tips!"

Then there's the fact that the alien race is defeated by... Ah screw it. This isn't worth the effort it takes to tear it down. It's just crap, and the worst sin it makes is that it never really feels like a *TNG* episode at all. The ensemble acts largely like themselves, which puts it ahead of most season one eps, but too much of the action is dominated by a one-off character who is supposed to be charming simply because, well, shut up, he's totally charming. Just dreadful through and through, and I say we wash our hands of the whole mess and move on.

Grade: D+

Stray Observations:

- Yes, that grade is motivated partially by vengeance. But then, aren't they all?
- It was neat seeing Picard in "normal person" clothes. That's not much, but there it is.
- God, how awful was the scene when Picard fools the perfectly within-her-rights landlady into thinking she's a good actress? The correct answer is: very.
- Not sure why people hearing the first fight between the aliens and the away team mistook "phaser fire" for "gun fire."
- Oh right, I forgot to mention the scene where Clemens tells the bellhop at Data's hotel to go to Alaska, and the bellhop's name is Jack London. There, I just mentioned it. It was terrible. Moving on.

"Realm of Fear"

Or The One Where Barclay Gets Beamed

Now, this is a little more like it.

It's not great. Let's not go crazy here. "Realm of Fear" takes a long time to get going, and it honestly never *really* gets going; it's more a semi-decent idea that wanders around a bit before getting tired and resolving. Barclay is annoying throughout, though he does have his moments. If I was going to introduce someone to the show, or put on an episode just for the hell of it, this would not be a first, tenth, or fiftieth choice. But at least it feels like an actual *TNG* episode, and at least it gets its job done in the space of a comparatively economic forty minutes and change. I'm not sure how much I really have to say about it, as I've already expressed my issues with Barclay as a character (in short, the idea of someone who isn't entirely functional working on the *Enterprise* isn't a bad one, but the execution too often turns him into a caricature), but I wanted to make sure that came across. Whatever its problems, "Realm" was better than "Time's Arrow, Part II," and that, really, is all I needed.

Plus, it takes on one of my favorite ideas from all of *Trek*: the fact that the transporters are, if you think about it, more than a little creepy. I'm sure we've discussed this before (there've been other transporter accident episodes), but it's worth repeating. The machine "converts" your entire body into data, rips you apart, and then puts you back together someplace else. Except, how sure are you that it's really "you" who's been reconstructed? The copy may be an exact copy, and the episode goes to great pains to ensure us that the teleporters are designed to be as airtight as possible, but it's not your original tissue, is it? In a very real sense, you've been killed and then a new version built, and it's possible to imagine every character we see on the show is just the thirtieth or fiftieth or hundredth iteration of someone we never actually met. Now, fine, this is a fictional show, and this is all kind of sort of magic anyway. But I appreciate it when someone asks these questions. Back in the day, we had Bones on *TOS* complaining about the transporters, and here we have Barclay, terrified of them. Admittedly, Barclay is terrified of everything, but at least this fear, it's not impossible to understand.

All right, so: Barclay's back! The *Enterprise* is checking on the *U.S.S. Yosemite*, a science ship that was investigating a plasma streamer before dropping out of contact. Our heroes find the ship floating dead in the water (so to speak), and Picard sends an away team over to investigate. Due to the ship's placement in the plasma, transportation is difficult, but Barclay comes up with a potential fix; unfortunately, because this fix requires some work on the other ship, Geordi orders Barclay to join the away team, and Barclay freaks out. (He freaks out about the transporter, not about being included on the away team. "Oh my god! Riker is so dreamy!") So he runs to Troi, they have an impromptu counseling session, and he works himself up to facing his fears. He beams over, helps out aboard the *Yosemite*—most of the crew is missing, although there is a horribly burned corpse—and then, when it comes time to beam back to the *Enterprise*, he sees something in the transporter field. Something that looks like a giant, floating worm. And it *bites* him.

Yeah, that would freak anybody out. All things considered, Barclay handles it well. He asks a few questions, and convinces Geordi and O'Brien that it might be a good idea to do an overhaul of the transporter equipment; this is something both men are more than willing to do, and we get a pleasant scene in which Barclay describes his concerns about the transporters, and O'Brien and Geordi scoff at them—in a friendly way. I've always appreciated how seriously crew-members on the *Enterprise* take each others concerns, no matter how ridiculous they might sound on the surface. This is partly just a matter of survival. Given the volume of weird shit the ship encounters on the course of its travels, you have to pay attention to detail, as you never know when some little girl's imaginary friend might turn out to be the representative of an alien race that's deciding whether or not it wants to murder you. But there's also a general sense of mutual respect, which makes this kind of storyline much easier to take.

Of course, this does have its downside. Normally in a story like this, most of the episode would be devoted to the protagonist's increasingly desperate attempts to get the people around him to believe what he's saying before it's too late. But because everyone is so trusting, that's not really a path that's open to us; if Barclay just told Geordi and the others that his arm was glowing, Beverly would run her tests, and we'd cut down the episode by a good ten minutes. So we need to find another conflict to delay the resolution, and in this case, "Realm" relies on Barclay's innate insecurities and self-doubt. After the diagnostic of the transporter equipment fails to reveal any significant flaws, Barclay decides he has "transporter psychosis," which is a silly name for something the episode invents for him to obsess over. He believes that he's hallucinating, and that he's thirsty because he's gone crazy, and since there's no known cure for TP, he tries to hide it from everyone and fight off the impending madness.

This isn't a completely unbelievable idea. I'm all too familiar with the way ridiculous or unsettling concepts can take hold of you, and warp your perceptions of reality until everything you see confirms your mistaken belief. And it's not like Barclay hasn't been set up as neurotic before. That's almost his only character trait. But I'm just not sure it makes for a great drama. We know in the audience that he's not really nuts, because that's not how shows like this work, and we know that "transporter psychosis" is bull, since Geordi and O'Brien both scoffed at the idea. So we get to sit through a lot of awkward "Barclay forces his way through his routine" scenes. While the crew is more than willing to listen to anyone's problems, they aren't particularly enamored of the concept of "personal space." Once Data notices that Barclay's been acting strangely (and since when is Data a snitch?), Troi starts badgering him, and when Barclay refuses to tell her his problem—which appears to be "walking around a lot" and "being slightly odder than usual"—she kicks him off active duty.

This seems like overkill to me. Barclay's behavior hasn't affected his work that I can tell, and he's always been a bit twitchy; Troi acts so frustrated that he won't tell her what she wants to hear that her imposed vacation almost plays like an action of spite. But it does isolate Reg, so that when he has another glowing arm attack, he's forced to confront his fears directly, asking O'Brien to beam him over to the *Yosemite* and back again so he can see if what happened before will happen again. This is a good scene—throughout the episode, Barclay's been more active than he's been allowed to be in the past, and the way he jumps right back into the here makes up for a lot of his nervous twitching. Once he determines that he's not just seeing things, Barclay calls a meeting of the senior staff to tell them what's going on. This is something else it's hard to imagine the old Barclay managing, and the episode rewards him by having the staff treat his concerns as viable and worth looking into. (Well, except for Worf. You know how we make fun of the show because every new alien threat has to prove its strength by beating Worf up? I think Worf serves in general as the Goofus to the rest of the *Enterprise's* Gallant. He's only really allowed dignity when he's compared to the foolishness of the rest of the Klingon race, and that's pretty lame when you think about it.)

The worms Barclay's been seeing were real after all, and in order to get a reading on them, Geordi asks Barclay to get back in the transporter beam, and stay there for just under a minute. I'm not sure I grasp all the ramifications of what happens next, but it is a fun scene, satisfying in a story sense (Barclay has to face his greatest fear in the worst way, much like O'Brien had to face all those freaky spiders), and suspenseful to boot. I'm surprised at how cavalier

Geordi is about asking Barclay to put himself at risk—it almost seems like Geordi doesn't think there *is* a risk, and while that may be technically true, those worm things indicate otherwise. But then, there's a surprise there too; at the last second, before getting pulled back into the *Enterprise's* transporter room, Barclay reaches out and *grabs* one of the worms, bringing it into physical form. There are a freaky few moments when it seems like Barclay's going to wind up with a giant worm in his arms—but then he comes into focus, and he's carrying a guy. One of the missing *Yosemite* crew members, in fact.

I didn't quite get how all this worked, but it wasn't an awful twist. "Realm" was a general meh episode; it relied too much on Barclay's oddness, and played a little too much like an ep of a cartoon show, where one of the character's has a phobia, and is then conveniently forced to face that phobia in order to teach us all a valuable lesson about nothing is quite as scary as we think it is. *TNG* is better than this, capable of more complex, adult stories. Still, it wasn't terrible. After *Generations* and the double barrel of crap that was "Time's Arrow," I'll take my blessings where I can find them.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- Is this the first time we've ever watched someone transporting from the perspective of the transportee? I think so. (Although there may have been a scene like this in *TOS*.)
- O'Brien's great throughout this episode. Wasn't a fan of the "Here, meet my pet spider" ending, but I like the idea of O'Brien owning a pet spider.
- "The imaging scanners are actuating." *TNG* went a little too far into the realm of technical bs in "Realm," and this line may be the epitome of that.

Next week: I am on vacation! Woo! So *TNG* reviews won't be returning till the following week. Please join me June 9th, as we once again face Deanna Troi's love life in "Man of the People," and spend some quality time with Scotty in "Relics."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Man Of The People"/"Relics"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[6/09/11 10:00AM](#)

"Man of the People" (Season 6, Episode 3)

Or The One Where Troi Gets Screwed By An Ambassador. No, The Other One.

There's nothing inherently wrong with Troi. From enough distance, there's nothing inherently wrong with *any* fictional character, at least on a conceptual level. An empathic counselor who works to help her fellow crewmembers deal with the stresses and tensions of living on the *Enterprise* makes a decent amount of sense. One of the ways *TNG* distinguishes itself from its predecessor is by admitting there are these touchy-feely sensations called "emotions," and that often times, grimacing and scenery chewing isn't the best way to process those emotions. Again, it's consequences, and Troi's presence is a sign of the show's commitment to thinking things through. It's just, that commitment seems to stop when the writers run into gender roles. There've been episodes throughout the series which have tried dealing with traditional concepts of male/female relations, with varying degrees of success, but Troi always seems to bring out the worst in everyone. By this point in the show, nearly the entire ensemble has been fleshed out and developed to more than stock roles, but Troi remains "The Girl," occasionally effective, all too often forced to behave like a cast-off from a '70s sitcom.

Really, "Man of the People" isn't the worst treatment she's had on the series. Apart from a bizarre line about "I'm going to reward myself with two ice cream sundaes," (I can't even explain exactly why this sounds so wrong, but it made me shudder) Troi comes across as normal enough. At least she does when she's not acting under the influence of some evil bastard's mind assault. One of the problems with "Man" is that so much of the episode is given over to Troi's degradation at the hands of Alkar, the horrible, no good, very bad ambassador who uses her as an external drive to store his bad vibes. Sure, it's unsettling while it's happening, and it's unsettling in a way that *TNG* very rarely is. But then you get to the last ten minutes, which on the one hand provides the satisfaction of Picard once again telling some jerkwad off, but on the other hand, makes Troi's pawn-status even more obvious. She gets to be

the victim (through no fault of her own, beyond simple compassion), and then somebody else comes in and rescues her; despite how much she's on screen, she's barely more than window-dressing.

Hell, it's not even like she really fell for the ambassador before he worked his horrible magic on her. I was prepared for that, as Troi has a history of falling for ambassadors, especially calm ones who do a lot of creepy direct eye contact, but apart from some minor attention and conversation, there's not a ton of chemistry there. Ves Alkar arrives aboard the *Enterprise*, on his way to negotiate a peace at Rekag-Seronia. He brings his mother (SPOILER: Not really his mother), Sev Maylor, with him, and while Alkar is friendly, courteous, and respectful, his mother is terrifying. She verbally berates Troi for a presumed romantic interest in her son, with a viciousness not often seen on *TNG*—she's one note, shrewish, a caricature of a hateful mother-in-law. Troi is understandably taken aback, but this doesn't stop her from maintaining friendly relations with Alkar, and when Maylor dies unexpectedly, it's reasonable that Alkar would turn to Troi for support. And, hey, Troi is an empath, and Alkar's funeral rituals require an empath to work, so just hold this stone here and close your eyes—KEEP THEM CLOSED, DAMMIT—and yeeeeeah. Yeah, that will do nicely.

I do have a few positive things to say about "Man." While it's obvious early on that Troi is under Alkar's influence, it's not clear for a long time just what that influence is, and the episode spends a lot of time demonstrating Troi's altered behavior without providing any explanation or context. First she tries to put the moves on Alkar, and he rejects her. Then she becomes increasingly sexually aggressive, apparently seducing a young male ensign and dressing all slutty and stuff. Which is hilarious, and not in the intentional way. I say she "apparently" seduces a young stud, because as far as we see, all she does is give him the eye in the turbolift, and then he hangs out in her quarters while she changes into something more comfortable. I'm assuming there was some sexy time, but apart from Troi's new outfit, there's no real indication. The whole thing is presumably intended to be disturbing, as we've never seen Troi behave this way before. But it's mostly just funny.

It's also more entertaining than much of Troi's usual, "Captain, I sense something" routines. It should be horrifying and sad as Deanna slowly but surely morphs into the hateful harridan who accompanied Alkar at the start of the ep, but there's something almost cathartic in seeing her blow up the way she does, lashing out at any attractive female who comes near Alkar and even going so far as to scratch Riker across the face and neck in the throes of passion. Well, maybe "cathartic" isn't quite the right word, but so much of *TNG* is soft voices, courtesy, and soothing gestures. Most everyone else in the cast has had a chance to get angry at some point during the run, but while I'm sure Troi has had a moment or two of rage (her frustration with her mother doesn't count), Sirtis is so often relegated to reactive, even passive behavior that it's fun to watch her blow up. Which makes "Man" less of a chore to get through, at least. And hey, maybe that's part of the appeal of stories like this. We can make noises over the selfishness and tragedy of Henry Jekyll, but we're really in it to see what Hyde's been getting up to lately.

This does present a problem, though, when Troi is entirely side-lined for the episode's climax. At first, Troi's change in attitude creates waves, but no suspicions, not even when she shows up in Ten-Forward in a Bond Girl dress, and nearly attacks Alkar's dinner companion. (Riker escorts her back to her room, and that's when she roughs him up. I do like how the series has made an effort at establishing the on-going friendship between these two; it's nowhere near as "will they or won't they," not least because they already did, but their interactions do a nice job of character building without making a big deal about it.) But Troi's sudden, rapid aging is harder to dismiss as a bad day, and eventually, Beverly realizes something's not quite on the up and up with ole Alkar. When Troi finally collapses, looking all of a billion years old, Alkar is in the middle of negotiations, and Picard has to beam down to confront him about what's going on. Alkar is surprisingly honest about what he's done—at least, as honest as a man who uses a pretend funeral ceremony to effectively murder pretty women.

It's an interesting scene. I always enjoy seeing Picard getting righteously pissed off, and as the true scope of Alkar's arrogance and cruelty become clear, Picard reacts as expected. And, like Troi's vamped up sex queen act, it's undeniably entertaining to see a character whose so thoroughly, unquestionably evil. Alkar creates forced psychic links with others and then dumps all his negative and unpleasant emotions into them, supposedly freeing him to stay calm and be more effective at his job. It's basically like *Portrait of Dorian Gray*, only instead of a painting, living beings have to suffer Alkar's sins by proxy. It's monstrous. Oh sure, Alkar makes the argument that he's helped millions through his actions, and his successes as an ambassador should more than outweigh the deaths he's caused. But that's paper thin. There are plenty of other ambassadors capable of doing much the same work he does, and nothing we see here makes him seem any more gifted at his work. Plus, there's the fact that he doesn't ask any of his victims permission before taking a psychic dump in their brains. And, even more telling, the fact that all of his "partners" are beautiful women. Oh sure, we never see Maylor in mint condition, but come on. This isn't a man sacrificing himself and others in the name of progress. This is someone who wants to use people without any of the guilt that comes with it.

Of course, the process here is never entirely clear—he tells Picard he projects his "negative" emotions into the women, but doesn't mean that Troi is supposed to be behaving as his Jekyll? I guess his "good" side justifies its actions in the same way that Alkar tries to justify himself to Picard, and then just channels any of his guilt into the link. Which, again, is super nasty, and it's fun to watch Beverly and Picard try and come up with ways to outsmart Alkar, while Troi lies dying and the ambassador sets his sights on his next victim.

But there's something a little tired about all of this, although I didn't realize it till after that confrontation scene. Partly it's the fact that Troi is once again getting emotionally entangled with an ambassador who has something to hide. This is, what, the third time this has happened? The fourth? And this isn't the first time she's had someone screw with her mind before, either. There's the way we never understand the context of Alkar's behavior: is this a culturally accepted action? His assistant doesn't realize what she's getting into when he starts putting the moves on her, but surely the way he powers through consorts—who have a strange habit of becoming drastically old and shrewish before dropping dead—would've been noticed by someone, especially considering that Alkar is in such a position of power and influence. Maybe the high-level government officials realize what's going on, but take steps to cover it up, since Alkar's efforts bring them such acclaim and respect. Or maybe not. The issue is less which back-story "Man" went with, and more that it didn't bother with much back-story at all. And then, just when the moral conflict is becoming a little interesting, Alkar conveniently dies. It's a suitably unpleasant death, and I sure didn't mind seeing the bastard go, but it does tie everything up in a too-neat package.

Really, though, I keep coming back to poor Troi. She deserves better than this, and while there are some laughs in seeing Sirtis get sarcastic mid-therapy session to a whiny crewmember, the laughs don't make up for the ill-usage. Having an episode where a character is reduced to a passive sufferer isn't problematic in and of itself; everybody needs help from their friends from time to time. But for someone who so rarely is allowed any autonomy to be once again reduced to a prop makes for tedious storytelling. There's no real psychological depth to Alkar's influence, and we don't learn anything new about Troi. Dramatically, this is all one note, and outside from a few amusing scenes, the chance to see Picard get his mad on, and a decently suspenseful climax, it doesn't hold together well at all.

Grade: C

Stray Observations:

- Oh, and it was super classy to have Troi feel herself up post-brain-link-up. What the hell was that supposed to represent? Alkar's masturbatory fantasies? There's so much dark, unpleasant sexual subtext running

through all this, and it doesn't fit the show well at all. It doesn't go anywhere, either, beyond the not-so-subtle implication that Alkar is one creepy, creepy dude.

- I did like that Beverly "killed" Troi in order to break the link. Makes me wonder what they would've done if that hadn't been an option, though.

"Relics" (Season 6, Episode 4)

Or *The One Where Scotty Beams Himself Up*

One of the smartest choices the creative team of *TNG* made when starting a new *Trek* series was pushing the show nearly a century after the events of *TOS*. After all, by the late eighties, the original *Enterprise* crew had become iconic to TV and film fans alike, and any series that tried to follow in their footsteps was going to have its work cut out for it. By starting long after Kirk, Sulu, Chekov and the others should've been dead, *TNG* allowed itself the space to find its own voice, without having to fill every episode with fan service and homage. Sure, there've been occasional nods to *TOS*. DeForest Kelley popped up in the premiere wearing a crapload of old age make-up. Sarek did a couple of guest spots before he died. And of course Spock had his two-parter last season. But while it took a season or two for *TNG* to come into its own, it was able to do so without putting William Shatner on the bridge, or turning Uhura in a computer simulation. The distance allowed us to accept that this was, for all intents and purposes, a new show, and not one that had to try and recapture whatever rough-hewn magic *TOS* achieved in its brief run.

Plus, the rarity of those callbacks makes it all the more fun when the writers (in this case, your friend and mine Ron Moore) decide to work one in. In "Relics," the *Enterprise* gets a distress call from the *Jenolan*, a Federation ship that went missing over seventy years ago. They follow the signal and find the ship has crash-landed on an honest to god Dyson Sphere, a previously theoretical model created in 1959 by Freeman Dyson that postulated a shell built around a star could allow people living on the inside of the shell access to almost limitless amounts of energy. No one's ever seen one built before, so Picard and the bridge crew are understandably impressed. And that's not the only wonder. Geordi, Riker, and Worf beam over to the *Jenolan*, and Geordi discovers that there's still a pattern left in the transporter buffer—a pattern that has someone managed to avoid significant degradation in the decades since the ship crashed. Geordi activates the energizer, and then, with a sound and visual affect familiar to anyone whose watched the original *Trek* series, Montgomery "Scotty" Scott (James Doohan), former Chief Engineer of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, fades into view.

If you followed my *TOS* reviews, I'm not a big fan of Scotty from his portrayal on that show; I found the character often problematic, and kind of unpleasant, for various reasons that aren't worth getting into here. He grew on me over time, and I enjoyed his presence in all the *Trek* movies, but I was surprised at just how much I liked him here, in a way I'm not sure I would've liked Sulu or Uhura if Moore had chosen one of them to appear. Nothing against Sulu or Uhura, or Chekov, or anyone else—Scotty just makes the most sense because his job on the original series is one that leads to the most potentially effective dramatic narrative when he finds himself in the "present" of *TNG*. As Chief Engineer, Scotty was a man made of his time, and his expertise and knack for problem solving saved his ship dozens of times over. But even as the movies went on, and the technology passed him by, there was a sense that he wouldn't be able to remain relevant much longer.

The movies played this gradual process of antiquization for laughs or "Right on!" moments, as Scotty was always able to find some loophole or trick to demonstrate his old-school cleverness could top any new tech that got in his way. But in "Relics," well, just look at the title. This is *TNG*, and, as such, there wasn't much chance that Doohan's guest spot was going to end with him feeling humiliated and alone. By the conclusion of the ep, Scotty has once again shown his usefulness, and he leaves the new *Enterprise* with a general sense of optimism and pride. And yet, even then—he *leaves*. Even after helping Geordi to save the day, there's no suggestion that Scotty stick around and

get retrained. (Well, I think someone—Picard?—suggests he go back to school, but Scotty rejects the suggestion, and rightly so.) This isn't an episode about death, exactly, but it is one about how good times pass us inevitably by, and how there will come a time in all our lives, if we're lucky enough to live that long, when we'll spend too much of our days reminiscing over the memory of when we really mattered.

"Relics" is a strong hour, then, both for the series and for the franchise, and it deals better with an old crew-member passing the torch to Picard than *Generations* did. (Or does, since when "Relics" aired, *Generations* was a few years down the road yet. Of course, that leads to a plot-hole when Scotty talks about Kirk in "Relics" as though he thinks Kirk is still alive, but I think we'd all be happy to pretend that *Generations* never existed.) I can see fans accusing the episode of being occasionally mawkish, or overly comic, or not focusing enough on the admittedly fascinating concept of the Dyson Sphere. The mawkish worked for me, because Doohan carries the character well, and the sentimentality was earned; and I actually laughed at most of the jokes, which is a rarity for this show. As for the Sphere, well, you got me there. It's a bit under-used, and we never get any sense of who built it or why. But, quite honestly, I don't care. *TNG* doesn't do a lot of hard sci-fi, and while there may be some plot that was squandered here, the episode as is works well enough that I find it hard to complain over possible missed opportunities.

So, Scotty is saved, and he beams back over to the *Enterprise*, where his attempts to involve himself with Engineering go about as badly as you'd expect. Wonder of wonders, you even see Geordi getting angry here, as Scotty's constant interruptions and misguided offers of assistance threaten to put him behind schedule. What makes this work is the way "Relics" manages to put our sympathies with a guest character, even while we still understand Geordi's point. Obviously it's hard to be told you're obsolete, and Geordi's initial condescension (it's subtle, but it's there, and it's a great character moment for La Forge), a sort of polite "Okay Grandpa, I'll pretend like you matter," makes it easy to be on Scotty's side, whether or not you have an emotional attachment to *TOS*. But the fact is, while he could probably stand a little more perspective, Geordi is essentially right. The mistakes Scotty makes in Engineering are all clear indications that he's no longer qualified or equipped to do the work he once did, no matter how much he might protest otherwise. Eventually, he's given a chance to prove himself back on the *Jenolen*, but that doesn't change the basic truth here: time passes, and even if you stay alive, you will get left behind eventually.

Scotty spends some time in Ten-Forward, trying to drink his way through his troubles; he's horrified to discover that the scotch served on the ship is non-intoxicating, but luckily Data is around to dip into Guinan's private stash. ("It is green," is a great laugh-line, and a fine call-back to *TOS* episode "By Any Other Name.") This leads to what may be the best scene of the episode, as Scotty wanders half-drunk to a holodeck and uses the computer to re-create the bridge of the original *Enterprise*. ("NCC-1701. No bloody A, B, C, or D.") The effects here are a little rocky, as the show didn't have the budget to recreate the original set, and mostly just green-screened Scotty in over old footage. But it's still effective and nostalgic and sweet, especially when Picard pops by for a chat about old ships and lost loves. Yes, on the one hand, there's a bit of that fan service I mentioned above here, as Picard and Scotty's conversation doesn't advance the plot, but dammit, that doesn't make it one whit less entertaining.

Of course, we can't just hang around and shoot the breeze the entire ep, so soon enough, Picard sends Geordi and Scotty back to the *Jenolen* to try and access the ship's data logs. This is supposedly to give Scotty something to do so he can feel useful again, but its story purpose is to get Geordi and Scotty off the *Enterprise* so that when Picard and the others manage to get themselves sucked into the Dyson Sphere, our twin engineers can come to the rescue. (Scotty and Geordi get the *Jenolen* running again, and use it to block open the entrance to the Sphere long enough for the *Enterprise* to escape.) It's a traditional ending, to a largely traditional episode, but that doesn't make it any less fun to watch. Doohan and Burton have a good chemistry together, and while their mutual antagonism never rises to the level of outright contempt, it's nice to see both men learning to respect and appreciate the other. After a generally unpleasant episode like "Man of the People" (which, even if it had been successful, would've been pretty creepy and unsettling), it's a relief to spend some time on an honest adventure with plenty of good vibes.

And Doohan is just a lot of fun throughout. The reveal that he used to exaggerate the amount of time projects would take in order to seem like a miracle worker is terrific, as are the handful of references to *TOS* episodes. But what makes this really work is that even if you didn't have any history at all with *Star Trek*, it would still be easy to appreciate what happens here. Because even if the details are specific to the franchise, the core idea—accepting that the world moves on, realizing you still have something to offer even if it's not as important as it used to be—are universal. I wonder if Moore ever considered killing Scotty off before the end of the hour. It wouldn't have been all that difficult, really, and I suppose there would've been a certain neatness to it. But I'm glad that, instead, Scotty ends up with a shuttlecraft, off to explore a galaxy slightly older than when he last saw it. It's a bit on the corny side, but like everything else in "Relics," it works better than it should have.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- It's a slightly sentimental A. I could take off points for the overly direct conversation between Geordi and Scotty on the *Jenolen*, but I won't.
- "When I was here, I could tell you the speed we were travelling by the feel of the deckplates." This is both a good line and an terrifying concept.

Next week: We fall into some "Schisms," and meet the "True Q."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Schisms"/"True Q"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)
[6/16/11 10:00AM](#)

"Schisms" (season 6, episode 5, original air date: 10/17/1992)

Or The One Where Was I

During the cold open, Data gives a poetry reading, and it goes about as well as you'd expect. His rhymes are impeccable (well, except for "effects" and "perplexed"), but the content, while conceptually adorable—"Ode to Spot"—is dry and emotionally flat. I suppose you could do an episode that devoted more time to Data's struggles with his cybernetic muse, but the real point of this scene is to see Riker struggling to stay awake. Data's recitation isn't particularly gripping, but Riker's dishevelment and clumsy attempts to cover for a brief nap are signs of someone who really hasn't been getting as much sleep lately as he should. Riker's woes are what get the ball rolling, story-wise, but watching this, I also couldn't help noticing the presence of two strange women in the audience, with short haircuts; one gets a close up or two, the other is sitting surprisingly near to Picard. The former is connected to episode's plot, but not in the way I was expecting. In fact, seeing these two glorified extras, I wondered if we wouldn't learn in the final reveal that the aliens who were kidnapping various members of the *Enterprise* crew for all sorts of unsavory tests hadn't slipped a pair of sleeper agents on board. I'm used to seeing unfamiliar faces wander around the background of the series, but surely the director wouldn't put these women out front and center if not for some reason.

There really is no reason, though. One of the women, like I said, is important; she turns out to be a former abductee, and, along with Riker, Geordi, and Worf, helps to reconstruct her experience in one of the episode's best scenes. But there's nothing malevolent about her, and the other woman, the one sitting so close to Picard during the poetry reading that their shoulders appear to be touching, is never seen again. I mention her here because there was something off about her, in the same way that something is off about all of "Schisms," both to the good and to the

bad. Nothing is quite as it should be. For much of its running time, the ep keeps you off balance, and even once the mystery of the missing time is resolved, this never really feels like *TNG*. It's more like an ep from earlier in the show's run, when the series was still trying to find itself. The main difference being, it's not terrible. The cast chemistry is solid, the characters behave as you'd expect, and, although it has its problems, "Schisms" never collapses in quite the way that early *TNG* often did. It's just—odd.

The oddness begins right off. There are those two ladies (and now I have a *Cabaret* song stuck in my head), but they aren't important. What is important is that the cold open doesn't have much in the way of drama, even if, plot-wise, this is one of the more intense outings the show has ever done. That's one of the elements that doesn't quite work, in retrospect; not the cold open itself, but the fact that, thinking back, "Schisms" never manages to have the impact it ought to have. This is an episode in which monsters from some subspace domain (sure, we can call them "aliens" all we like, but we've seen aliens before on this show, and these things are something new) abduct crew-members from the *Enterprise* and perform awful, occasionally fatal tests on them, for reasons that never become entirely clear. Our heroes never make contact with these creatures, or even really defeat them. Riker hits one with a phaser blast, but in the end, the biggest victory is closing off the gate the monsters have created, although not before the monsters send *something* into our universe. That something is never referenced again, much like the alien threat in "Conspiracy" back in the first season. But it's still a pretty big deal, right?

And yet the balance is off. The build up is fine. Riker's confusion, his growing inability to concentrate, are convincingly done, and never over-played. I like how much comes across from the simple fact that his hair is a mess—the Riker we know would never let himself be seen in such a state, not if he could help it. The *Enterprise* is investigating the Amargosa Diaspora, an "unusually dense globular cluster," which leads to a lot of tech talk, and, eventually, a strange glowing rift on a cargo bay wall that's apparently chock full of tetryons. Geordi and Data can't figure out what's causing the rift, and while they investigate, Riker and others on the ship experience bizarre fugue states, during which some object or angle will remind them of a moment from their past that they can't completely remember. It's obvious that these two stories (the tetryons and the fugue states) are connected—that's how this always works. But "Schisms" does a decent job of not showing its hand too quickly, and never belaboring its premise. As well, some of the trances are deeply unsettling, like Riker's weird caress of the helm, or Worf's brief fixation on his barber's scissors.

This all comes to a head when Riker tells Troi about his experiences, and Troi tells him that she's had other crewmembers reporting similar problems. She gets everyone together in a group, and after they all decide *something* is going on, they head to the holodeck to work together to re-create whatever event has warped their minds. This is a great scene, although it doesn't exactly play fair. The idea is, Riker and the rest suggest an object for the computer to create, and then adjust that object until it fits whatever it is they've forgotten. Which is cool, and it's nice to see the holodeck being used for something other than improbable vacations, but the computer does way too much of the work. Someone will say "the table was made of metal," and all of a sudden a slanted wooden structure (which didn't look particularly table-ish to begin with) transforms into a sort of nightmare dentist's chair. I realize that some short-cutting is needed, given the time constraints of the episode and the patience of the audience, but surely the scenario could've been handled a little more smoothly. As is, it works largely because it's an excellent idea, and because the "table" that starts the session grows increasingly more frightening as our heroes get closer to the truth. However implausible that journey is (and I'll be curious to hear if you think I'm picking nits), it's an episode highlight.

So what's my problem? I'm just not sure *TNG* can support the kind of eerie, inexplicable terror that "Schisms" spends much of its time aiming for. The scenes where it works are effective, but once it's time for the heroes to face off against the main threat, the scares largely go away, and in their place are some spooky, silly lizard-men, a lot of techno-babble, and the sort of climax we've seen a dozen times before. When the truth is revealed, all the scares

vanish, and with them, the main vibe holding the episode together. It's an alien abduction riff, nothing more, nothing less. Riker manages to take a homing beacon along with him during his last abduction, and by tracking the beacon, Geordi pinpoints the lizard-men's location, and closes the rift between their domain and the *Enterprise*. There's some suspense as to whether or not Riker will be able to rescue himself and Ensign Rager before the gap closes, but it's not *that* much suspense. None of this is badly done, and the alien ship is eerie, in an *X-Files*-ish kind of way. It's just not all that great.

See, if "Schisms" had tried to keep up the creepy, we-don't-know-what's-going-on-but-we're-pretty-sure-it's-awful feeling it manages with a fair amount of success in its first half, then the ending wouldn't have needed another level. The horror of the absurd is that it presents impossibilities with no explanation, showing events which can't be real but are anyway. (I remember reading "The Metamorphosis," and not understanding why it was so terrifying until I realized, hey, a giant bug *is* terrifying.) Think David Lynch movies, the way Lynch's almost childlike straightforwardness renders his audiences incapable of protecting themselves from what, in other contexts, would be laughable threats. "Schisms" never really gets that far, but it has its moments; only, because this is *TNG*, it can't completely commit to them. There has to be some sort of reason in the end, in which everything confirms to the basic rules of the show's reality. This also could've worked, if the lizard-men had had any character to them, any sense that they were anything beyond ciphers. But they didn't, and we're left with an ep that has moments of greatness, but never manages to do much with them.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- Troi was fun this ep—not a huge focus, but for once, her role on the ship was necessary and useful, and she didn't eat any chocolate that I could tell.
- "We've all been here before."
- So, Ensign Hagler died because the lizard-men did *something* to his blood. Whatever the reason, that can't be a fun way to go.

"True Q" (season 6, episode 6, original air date: 10/24/1992)

Or The One Where Q Comes Back For The Blonde

After a somewhat off-format episode, "True Q" brings us back to a *TNG* staple: a protagonist faced with a difficult moral choice. (All right, so that's a staple of *all* drama, but I needed a segue.) It also marks the return of John de Lancie's Q, who we haven't seen round these parts since "Qpid" back in season four. If you're having a hard time remembering "Qpid," it's the episode in which Q transports everyone to a simulation of Sherwood Forest, so that Picard, playing Robin Hood, can save his lady love from, well, who cares. Really, it wasn't a particularly good ep, apart from a handful of fun jokes; as TV comfort food, it was unobjectionable, but considering Q is the one who brought the Borg into the *Trek* franchise (and did so in one of the series' first great hours), it's hard not to be frustrated that he's been relegated to irritating comic relief ever since.

"True Q" isn't what I'd call a return to form, but it is significantly more interesting than "Qpid," because it knows the best way to use a character whose powers make him a tricky fit for the show. Q is essentially a call-back to *TOS*; his godlike being abilities are never explained or justified with anything even remotely approaching science, and, while I love de Lancie, his performance would be more suited to the munchable scenery of the first *Trek*, as opposed to this new *Enterprise*'s less edible (but more nutritious) backgrounds. That doesn't mean Q can't work on *TNG*. The contrast between Picard and the rest of the ensemble's straightforward nobility, and Q's self-centered pranking, can be entertaining when done well. The trick, then, is coming up with a good justification for Q's presence before

bringing him into a story. Either he's around because his powers have been revoked, like in "Deja Q," or else he's there to serve as a catalyst for another character's actions. He has to be part of some kind of problem, but, given his relationship with the *Enterprise*, it's hard to see him as much of a threat anymore. (One of the reasons "Qpid" didn't really work is that there was never any sense of what the stakes were, or why any of what we saw was happening, beyond "The writers wanted to do something with Robin Hood, but didn't want to use the Holodeck.") He needs to have a reason to visit, and there need to be potential consequences to that visit, and not just ones that Q can wave away.

Enter Amanda (Olivia D'Abo, who was actually in her early twenties when this was shot, which surprised me—she looks younger), an intern who's earned herself a spot on the *Enterprise*. Amanda is smart and studious, and she's determined to make the most of her time on the ship, but it might not work out the way she hopes. She has these amazing abilities that have recently begun to manifest in ways she doesn't understand. Like, she'll mention dogs, and a bunch of puppies will appear on her carpet. Or she'll see a heavy barrel falling on Riker, and she'll magic it away. Or the ship's engines will explode, and she'll have to pull everything back together. Amanda's parents died when she was young, and she was raised by step-parents, but her parents weren't just regular humans—they were Q. And that means Amanda may be Q as well, and that's when our Q shows up. He's been sent by the Continuum to determine just what Amanda is. If Amanda is Q, she can go back to the Continuum with de Lancie. But if she doesn't want to, and she can't refrain from using her powers, well...

"True Q" is reminiscent of the first season episode, "Hide and Q," in which Q gave Riker powers, and offered him much the same choice Amanda gets here. Both episodes are built around scenes of someone stumbling onto abilities they'd never imagined possible, and gradually coming to the realization that they can do anything—but that doesn't mean they *should*. "True" works better because, well, this is a much better show than it used to be; it doesn't look nearly as chintzy, and the regular cast is much more comfortable in their roles. The writing is better, too—not perfect, but better. Plus, the character who has to choose between Q-dom and a regular life in "True" is a guest star, which means her decision is entirely up for grabs. There was never any real threat that Riker would join the Continuum. But Amanda... who knows?

"True" benefits from a strong, self-assured performance from D'Abo, who invests Amanda with just the right amount of humbleness, determination, and immaturity to make her journey from human to being of unimaginable power understandable and sympathetic. From the start, she's presented as an exceptional young adult, someone who's spent her whole life working to get to where she thinks she wants to go, and that helps make the conflict when the Q powers hit her more dynamic; we don't necessarily need another lesson in how absolute power corrupts, but at least this one presents the case in a way that doesn't make Olivia look like an idiot for eventually being tempted. She also has to stand up to Q for much of the ep, and in order for this to work, she has to simultaneously be fascinated by him, and not particularly impressed, and D'Abo manages both side of the performance quite nicely.

She fits in well with the rest of the crew, or at least the ones we see while she's trying to make up her mind. She bonds most closely with Beverly Crusher, which may be because she's interested in medicine, or because Beverly had her own gifted child. Picard does his fair share of work as well. He's suspicious when he first hears the story of what happened to Amanda's parents, investigates further, and determines that they were killed by a tornado in Kansas (the tornado really should've taken the baby away to the Continuum, just to complete the reference). He pesters Q about this, learns the choice that faces Amanda, and makes sure Amanda knows for herself what the stakes are before things get too far. And then there's Riker. Amanda gets a crush on him, and, when she sees him spending time with another woman, tries to force him to love her. But it doesn't work out like she wants it to, and so she decides she wants to try and make a go of it as a human.

Only, conveniently enough, Amanda runs into the same sort of test Riker ran into back in "Hide": while it's easy enough to recognize the bad things a person can do with too much power, and reject them because they're hollow and dissatisfying, it's not quite so simple when you're faced with a situation in which using your abilities, even though you know you shouldn't, would save lives. So she gives in and magics away a disaster on a planet (saving Riker's life in the process), and decides she'll go the Continuum after all. It's not the ending I would've expected, but it works. It's a "real" ending, and not a TV ending (by which I mean an ending that conforms to the status quo, or makes us feel comfortable, even if it's not particularly realistic)—even if Amanda isn't a regular character on the show, choosing to continue being human would've been a safer story decision. It's not shocking, but there is a certain sadness to it. Going to the Continuum means giving up on the relationships she's established, and it means saying goodbye to her crush on Riker. Being Q means no more silly infatuations. She has to grow up very fast.

"True" doesn't entirely work for me. As strong as D'Abo is, and as much as I like de Lancie, I feel like the Continuum needed to be more clearly defined for all of this to hold together. Given Q's dislike of infants, I'm curious as to how Amanda's parents could procreate (in that procreating doesn't seem to be a Q thing), and how it was possible to kill them with a tornado, given that the reason they were executed was their refusal to stop using their powers. This can be explained away without that much effort, I expect, but while I appreciate the seriousness with which it's played, the conflict here just doesn't have the impact that *TNG* manages in its best episodes. Unlike "Schisms," this ep is in *TNG*'s comfort zone, and it's consistent throughout. But it doesn't aim as high as "Schisms" did, and its conventionality makes it enjoyable, but hardly essential.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- "Well, if it isn't Number Two."
- I wish I could make puppies appear out of nowhere.
- I'm not sure making Riker love her is all that impressive a use of Amanda's powers. Pretty sure a stiff drink and that dress would've done the job well enough.
- There's a quick scene in which the Continuum contacts Q about his mission—just a talking shadow on a hallway wall. It's very cool, and I wouldn't have minded more of that.
- There's been some talk about getting rid of grades in TV Club Classic reviews. I don't mind 'em at this point, but I thought I'd throw it out to the group—should I stick with 'em, or junk 'em?

Next week: We realize we have to watch "Rascals" and "A Fistful of Datas."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Rascals"/"A Fistful Of Datas"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[6/23/11 10:00AM](#)

"Rascals" (season 6, episode 7, first aired 10/31/1992)

Or The One Where O'Brien Is Briefly Transformed Into Doug Hutchinson

This won't come as a shock to any of you, but I don't know that much about science. I enjoy science fiction, but in terms of believability, all I ask is that the story not directly contradict any basic physical laws. (Or if it does, it should at least provide some explanation for doing so.) But even I have to question the logic of an energy disruption/transporter malfunction that somehow de-ages four *Enterprise* crew-members to early adolescence. Beverly and O'Brien work up some explanation involving biological coding and power fluctuations, but it's a stretch that such an event would happen entirely randomly, without any connection to anything else.

"Rascals" hinges on this premise, and it's safe to say, I was disposed against it from the start. That's not entirely due to the implausibility; reducing Picard, Ro Laren, Guinan, and Keiko to youthful versions of themselves is a concept which doesn't interest me in the slightest, plausible or no. Usually, when it comes to premises, I can understand where the writers are coming from even if I don't entirely agree that they got there. To me, that's one of the jobs of the critic: while I obviously have my own personal preferences and reflexive dislikes, and while pure objectivity in criticism is a laughable impossibility, I do believe it's the duty of people who write silly articles like this one to be able to look past their own personal tastes in their work. Which is such an indistinct way of putting it that I doubt I've explained myself at all—really, all I'm saying is, even if a story fails, I can usually see why someone would want to tell it. I don't really understand why anyone would think "Rascals" is a good idea. It's not the worst episode of *TNG* I've seen, and the third act is actually surprisingly strong, but the basic idea of it baffles me. There are a few interesting ideas here, and the episode does as decent a job as could be expected at thinking through the

ramifications of suddenly losing decades (in the physical sense) off your life. But I'm just not convinced these are questions that demanded answers.

Maybe I'm just bitter. We're seven episodes into the season, and this is the closest thing a Picard-centric storyline we've had yet, but Patrick Stewart is barely in it. We see him at the beginning, waxing philosophical about some pottery shards, and he shows up at the end, once the bad guys have been defeated and Beverly comes up with a way to restore everyone to their proper ages. But for most of the ep, Picard is played by a teenager named David Birkin. Birkin does a fine job; of the four actors brought in to replace the adults in the ep, he's by far the best. (Isis Carmen Jones, as Guinan, is the worst, but we'll get to that.) It's just, you can say Birkin is Picard, and you can try and give him the same dialog grown-up Picard would have, and the dilemmas you'd imagine a youthized Picard would have to deal with, but it's not Patrick Stewart, so I have a hard time getting invested.

At least the problems Lil Picard faces are dramatically sound. After the accident, the affected deal in different ways. Picard and Keiko attempt to go on with their life as normal; Ro Laren mopes, because that's what Ro Larens do best; and Guinan encourages Ro to view what happened as an opportunity, rather than a curse. The real threat of an episode like this, the danger of it going from "eh" to "OH GOD IT BURNS MAKE IT DIE," is that it goes in the direction of "Kick the Can," Steven Spielberg's segment from the *Twilight Zone* movie. (Which, it's been pointed out, was based on an original series episode, but since I've only seen the movie version, that's what I'm referring to.) In "Can," a group of oldsters gets a second shot at childhood, which leads to a lot of fun-having and playing around and soft light and delightful, life-affirming music. (Then nearly everybody decides they'd rather be old, which always struck me as kind of bullshit.) It's corny as hell, and when "Rascals" made a few feints in that direction, I tensed up, expecting the worst.

This was fairly reactionary of me, to be sure, but in my defense, Guinan is in this, and she's at her absolute worse. After lecturing Picard about his archaeology work (how dare someone relax the way they choose to relax on their time off? The only way to have a vacation is the Guinan-approved way!) in the cold open, Guinan spends her time as a youngster lecturing Ro Laren about how she needs to have more fun. The actress is terrible, delivering every line as though looking to earn high marks in Enunciation and Condescension 101, and that does the character no favors, but really, Guinan's Yoda act gets old no matter who's spewing it. There's supposed to be an emotional resonance in Ro's softening from hard-ass to (sigh) "jumper," and the ep even ends with her savoring her last few moments as a child. But it's hard to get much sense out of the journey, as the circumstances are so bizarre. Ro complains that she had a rough childhood, but it's not as though she's in the same situation as she was then. Why not have her get frustrated by her inability to go about her normal duties on the ship?

That's the direction Picard goes in, and it at least makes sense. He attempts to go about his business as usual, and Beverly explains to him that this might not be the best idea, given his current state, and the fact that they don't anything about what's happened to him. So he relinquishes command, and later has a brief conversation with Troi about what he might like to do if his reversion to young (young) adulthood remains permanent. It's not the most intense decision making process, but at least it makes reasonable sense, and allow Birkin-as-Picard to maintain some measure of the character's dignity. More dramatically interesting are Keiko's attempts to act the house-wife with O'Brien. The ep doesn't get explicit, but it does show how impossible it would be for O'Brien to adjust suddenly being married to a teenager. Even the most seemingly harmless of intimacies don't work—she embraces his arm and leans against him, a gesture which could just as easily be daughter-to-father as wife-to-husband (which doesn't make it any less creepy, really), and he jumps away, horrified. On poor Keiko's side, there's the fact that their daughter no longer recognizes her as Mom.

This isn't bad stuff. The Keiko scenes are especially smart, because they take an inherently absurd idea and treat it seriously. And if the episode had made more of an effort to follow through on this, I might have been more kindly

disposed towards it. Instead, we get a third act which largely puts these questions aside, in exchange for a sort of *Die Hard On A Starship* scenario, in which a group of rogue Ferengi trick the *Enterprise* crew, board the ship, and take over, beaming all the adults to the planet below to work in the mines. Seriously. It's fun to watch, no question; in fact, I'd say the fight against the Ferengi is "Rascals" most entertaining segment. Picard and the others are put in with the rest of the kids, and the captain immediately gets to work trying to find a way to use the element of surprise to their advantage. Guinan offers him the helpful advice of "acting like a kid," which Picard takes to mean distracting the Ferengi guards, grabbing phasers from various storage places around the ship, and, ultimately, using the classroom computer to beam all the Ferengi onto a shielded transporter pad. In order to do this, Picard has to pretend he's Riker's son, which leads to what you'd expect: some awkward fake sentiment, hugging, and a few well-earned laughs.

It works, by and large, a nice mini-action movie that helps pick up a generally dodgy hour. But in order for this shift to work, "Rascal" has to throw aside all the questions raised in the earlier part of the episode. You could argue that Ro learns the joy of play while tricking Ferengi, and Guinan's comment about how they need to act their age is probably intended as a lesson that Picard and Keiko need to learn as well—but it's hollow. Picard doesn't need to learn a damn thing, and neither does Keiko; it's not like Ro really needed to learn how to be a child or anything, either. Enjoyable as their battle against the villains is, it's so disconnected from what comes before it to make the whole first half of the episode play like padding. This was better than I was expecting (in fact, I enjoyed both episodes this week more than I thought I would), but while some of the individual pieces work, they never add together properly. The Ferengi section really feels like it should be part of an episode in which the children of the *Enterprise* were feeling devalued. While I'm grateful (so, so grateful) that's not the ep we got, that doesn't make "Rascals" a success.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- Funny how Picard and the others go young right before the ship encounters a threat which turns their newly acquired youth into a crucial benefit...
- "You're on the most beautiful planet in the quadrant, and you spent your whole time in a cave?" Just.. shut up.
- "He's my Number One Dad."
- The brief moment when Lil Picard appreciates his new hair was amusing.
- Riker's ability to spew out phony tech data at the increasingly confused Ferengi is nothing short of amazing.

"A Fistful Of Datas" (season 6, episode 8, first aired 11/7/1992)

Or The One Where Troi Pretends She's Clint Eastwood, But Worf Does A Better Job Of It

I liked this.

I know, I'm as surprised as you are. It has plenty of elements I've come to dislike on *TNG*: Brent Spiner doing comedy voices; the holodeck; a meandering story that works to strengthen a character relationship (the father-son bond between Worf and Alexander) by simply repeating ideas we've seen before (hey, did you know Worf loves his son enough to rescue him from danger?); and, of course, Alexander. You throw Lwaxana Troi in there, maybe find a new suitor for Deanna and bring back Wesley at his most irritatingly precocious, and you'd have yourself a show-killer right there. I don't think every episode of a television series should be aimed directly at my sweet spot, and, as I mentioned earlier, I'll do my best to find value in stories and scenarios that don't immediately appeal to me. That's

part of the fun of art; every once in a while, you'll find something that changes your mind. But this? I've seen this before, and the title alone had me shaking my head and stomping my foot like a five year-old.

But... I liked this. Quite a bit, actually. I'm sure that has something to do with lowered expectations—I was expecting a teeth-grindingly painful slog through bad comedy and worse sentiment, so anything short of that *Full House* episode where D.J. picked up a meth habit and Uncle Jesse just happened to be slinging crystal at the time because the band was falling apart, and Uncle Joey was bringing Michelle to baby fights and putting sick wads of cash on her gouging out a toddler's right eye, and Danny didn't realize what was going down until a drunken, strung out Kimmy offered to take him around the world in exchange for a "taste," I was going to be pleasantly surprised. I don't think lowered expectations can entirely explain it, though. I'm going to go out on a limb here, and say that I believe "Fistful" is not half bad. I wouldn't put it up there in the echelon of *TNG* classics, but I'd be more than willing to label it as a solid, pleasant piece of work.

One of the reasons I dug "Fistful" (that sounds vaguely filthy to me, for reasons I won't get into here) is that, while a life-or-death situation does eventually develop, it starts off as a laid-back, low key episode, with various characters killing time while the *Enterprise* waits to meet another ship. Picard is in his quarters, working on a flute solo in between interruptions, Beverly is directing a play called *Something For Breakfast*. Geordi and Data have come up with some wacky plan to hook Data's brain into the ship's computer, so that he could serve as a back-up in case anything went wrong with the main system. And Worf and Alexander are spending some quality time in the holodeck, in a program set in the Old West. Drama generally comes from characters forced to deal with problems which have high stakes, and initially, the stakes here are low to non-existent. Sometimes that's okay, though. A TV show can get a lot of mileage out of reinforcing our sense of a shared world, and an opening like this, which gives the impression of what the ensemble does in its downtime, helps create the illusion that they're not just words on paper and actors on sets.

Conflict does eventually arise, although we have had largely conflict free episodes before. (Or at least eps with minor, non-life-threatening consequences.) While Worf and Alexander are screwing around in Cyber-Deadwood, Data and Geordi's attempts to integrate Data into the computers hit a slight glitch. Geordi immediately disconnects Data from the machine (well, from the *other* machine), but the damage has already been done. Worf and Alexander's adventures had been pretty straightforward. There's a bad guy (John Pyper-Ferguson, who disappointed me by never screaming at someone for touching his gun), Worf has to arrest him, and then hold him until he can transport his prisoner to higher authorities. Except someone grabs Alexander and takes him to a secret hide-out, which is not supposed to happen until later; and that someone is, apparently, Data. Only it's Data acting like he's the head villain, with a black hat and gloves and sneer to match. And he doesn't behave as if he recognizes Alexander at all.

This is the part of the ep I was dreading; giving Spiner multiple roles is tricky, and the goofy setting makes it all too easy to imagine a lot of shticky over-acting and bad camp. And yet, Spiner does a decent job. As Frank Hollander, the family patriarch, he's reserved and effectively threatening, and while the twang in his voice is a bit on the irritating side when he plays Hollander's hothead son, he never gets too ridiculous. Troi, who joined Worf and Alexander's game earlier in the ep, theorizes that in order to escape the program ("Computer, stop program" isn't working anymore), they'll need to see the story through to the end. As Worf negotiates the release of his son, more and more bad-guys get Data-ified, and while this could've been stupid, it's played more creepy/funny, and largely succeeds on those terms. Worf, realizing that he's facing off against villains with all of Data's speed, strength, and enhanced abilities, builds a temporary shield for himself for the final showdown, in what amounts to a pretty clever nod to the movie that gave this episode its name. (In *A Fistful of Dollars*, Clint Eastwood uses a piece of metal from a stove to block the bad guy's rifle shots in the final showdown.) Alexander is reunited with his father, Worf proves he's not always a joke, and Troi gets to help. Happy endings all around.

So, yeah, this wasn't hellish, although I'm not sure I have a whole lot to say about it. There are points to criticize. Alexander's still whiny, although he's not nearly as bad here as he has been before. It kind of feels like we've had enough Worf and Alexander getting to like each other episodes in the past, and I'm not sure I needed to see Worf once again realize how much he loves and values his son. On the other hand, well, Worf got to be the hero this time, for once, and he gets some good lines, and maybe there's something to be said for acknowledging that loving your child doesn't necessarily mean you always want to hang out with him. Troi's Western "accent" is atrocious, but in general, she acquits herself as well as everyone else, kicking her own fair share of ass, and even getting to wear a reasonably unembarrassing outfit for once. The Deadwood set is, well, what you'd expect. I'd say it's a little more effective than the sets we saw during Picard's private detective days, but that could just be a matter of taste.

Right, I was criticizing, wasn't I. Well, while the plot here works from a general, "Okay, it's probably magic" level, it does make Data and Geordi look foolish. There's no sudden electrical storm or unexpected ship malfunction while Data's hooked into the system—it seems that the computers just have a bad reaction to the android's neural net, and while I'm willing to accept that could happen (and that Geordi and Data wouldn't be prepared for it), I don't understand why they didn't make more of an effort to isolate the work they were doing from the rest of the ship. They ask Picard for permission to take engineering off-line for a couple hours, but surely that should always have made sure whatever they were doing wouldn't interfere with other tech. At the very least, giving everyone a heads up might've been nice. Data's malfunction affects seemingly half the ship, screwing with Beverly's play rehearsal, and interfering with Picard's music. Even Data himself is affected, as he starts speaking like the characters he usurps in Worf and Alexander's Western simulation without realizing it. All of which just gives the impression that for all their combined brainpower, Data and Geordi started screwing around without having any real idea of the danger, or taking reasonable precautions. Which is a small nitpick, but still.

I'm also a little fuzzy on just how Data ends up re-creating himself in the holodeck. It makes a sort of intuitive sense: his memory and personality is filtering into the system, so his appearances as multiple characters in Deadwood just seems like something that might very well happen. Only, why does it start with just one character, and then seep outward? Why that particular character? And why, while each character retains their original programmed personality, do they also somehow have Data's physical strength and ability? I'm not sure his strength is something that's part of his neural net. It's interesting how havoc Data's temporary invasion causes only really endanger Worf, Alexander, and Troi—most other episodes, you'd expect the ship to spiral further out of control, but here, what happens in the holodeck just sort of goes on under the radar. (And not that I really need to mention it, but for the umpteenth time, why keep the holodeck? Three people could've been killed here, and to what purpose?)

Really, though, this is a nice, mildly goofy hour that manages not to overplay its absurdities, and allows Worf to kick some ass. Maybe that's the reason I'm so fondly disposed towards it right there: for once, Worf gets to be the unquestioned hero. Sure, he's doing it to save his kid (Worf can be a hero when he's fighting Klingons or protecting Alexander, but, until *DS9*, that appears to be it), but he's resourceful here, powerful, and he shoots a gun out of a robot's hand. In many ways, the homage to classic Westerns in "Fistful" is as corny as the nods to classic hardboiled crime fiction were in the Dixon Hill episodes, but these work better, because this really isn't an homage to anything. It's just a dad having fun with his son, and I can groove on that. Hell, the last shot is of the *Enterprise* sailing off into the sunset, a nod so resoundingly, unabashedly dorky I can't help but be a little charmed by it.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- When Beverly asks Picard to appear in her play, he tells her, I'm not much of an actor." Yeeeah, sure you aren't. (He does seem a little disappointed when she tells him the role she wants him to play only has two lines.)
- "So, we are in law enforcement." The amount of satisfaction Worf gets from this is amusing.
- Alexander tells Worf that Barclay helped him create the program, and Worf assumes Barclay put the whores in.

Next week: We debate "The Quality of Life," and get started on "The Chain of Command, Part 1."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Quality Of Life"/"Chain Of Command, Part One"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)
[6/30/11 10:00AM](#)

"The Quality of Life" (season 6, episode 9, first aired: 11/14/1992)

Or The One Where Data Nearly Breaks The First Rule of Robotics

It's easy to sympathize with Data for much of this episode. Fiction teaches us to support anyone trying to protect life, and right up till the moment when Data demonstrates he's willing to let Geordi and Picard die to save a handful of jumped up shop-vacs, that support isn't all that difficult to maintain. After all, Data is such a nice, reassuring presence, and he has the benefit of being nearly always right. Plus, Dr. Farallon, the scientist responsible for the machines that cause all this confusion, is single-minded and self-righteous enough to make it fun to side against her. Really, though, she does have a point. Imagine if your microwave started getting uppity or if your computer deleted programs without consulting you. You'd assume the machines were malfunctioning, right? You certainly wouldn't think you were witnessing the birth of new life.

Or maybe you would; I'm not privy to what goes on in your sordid little apartment, anyway. Still, even if you are somehow gifted with insight above and beyond the capacity of normal men, it's rare for the rest of us to see what we don't expect to see. "Quality of Life" deals with questions the show has dealt with before, and for most of its running time, it does its best to show just how difficult those questions can be. I said it's easy to sympathize with Data for most of the episode, and it is, but that's because we in the audience have a certain edge; while there's always a chance that the exocomps (the jumped up shop-vacs I mentioned before) really will be glitching as Dr. Farallon believes, we know from experience that's probably not the case. From the characters' perspective, though, "Quality" doesn't make things easy. The exocomps look about as far from living as possible. If your career was on the line, would *you* want to throw aside your dreams to see if the calculator was crying?

The *Enterprise* is visiting the Tyran System, where Geordi is assessing a new mining system devised by the ambitious, driven Dr. Farallon. The system (which uses an orbital laser to mine material from the planet below, and there's also a lot of science goobledy-gook involved) has had its fair share of problems, and Geordi isn't completely sold on it. He thinks the doctor has made some amazing leaps forward, but he's not convinced the equipment is ready for wide-spread use. Farallon believes otherwise, and one of the reasons she's so confident is that she's invented a new robot that can quickly and efficiently perform the kind of elaborate repairs the system demands. She demonstrates one of these robots, an exocomp (which sounds like it should be a Japanese mecha anime series from the '80s, but never mind that), to Geordi, who is suitably impressed. Only, when she tries to use the exocomp to fix another problem, the machine returns without having fixed anything, right before the entire station is rocked by explosions.

When Geordi checks the seemingly faulty exocomp, he and Data discover numerous new circuit pathways inside the machine's "brain." Farallon designed the exocomps so that they could learn as they progressed and form new connections on their own with each new problem they solved, but she says that after a certain point, the machine starts creating connections apparently at random, for no purpose she can determine. Once that happens, the exocomp becomes worthless, and she has to erase its systems and start over again. She explains this casually, as if it's not anything to be that impressed by, but Data is intrigued. And quite frankly, Farallon's nonchalant dismissal of her own machine's odd behavior doesn't speak too well of her. (At most, she's exasperated by the whole thing.) For someone with the technical know-how to design this kind of robot, especially someone so well-versed and fascinated by Data's neural pathways, to not even consider the ramifications of what's happening right before her eyes is, quite frankly, embarrassing. The point of the episode is that she's so committed to her mining work, she doesn't realize what she's inadvertently accomplished on the sidelines, but as with many guest *TNG* characters, her blindness seems more plot-dictated than organic.

This becomes a problem later in the episode, once Data determines that there is good cause to believe that the exocomps are alive (I'm half-convinced this episode was written after someone made a bet that they could make the cast say a very stupid word in very serious tones a dozen or more times without laughing) and sets about trying to prove his case to the others. Farallon, after being portrayed as largely sympathetic (if somewhat blindered) for the early part of the episode turns more openly antagonistic here. And it's frustrating, because it sets her up to fail. She's clearly making her decision based on emotion: she's completely invested in making sure her mining system succeeds, and the idea that the tools which are crucial to her efforts might have rights or needs throws a wrench into everything. "Quality" obviously needs *some* conflict, but if Farallon had just been a little less angry about the whole thing, a little less quick to ignore the conclusions of someone she claims to respect, it might've played better.

It might also have given us more time to deal with the most interesting aspect of the episode: Data's decision to disobey orders, a decision which directly endangers two of his closest friends. Data tries to prove the exocomp is alive by recreating the initial crisis that caused him to be suspicious of the machine in the first place. The idea being, if the 'comp flees again, that first glitch wasn't a glitch at all, but a clear indication of self-preservation. The tests fail, but Data, with some help from Beverly, eventually discovers that it fails not because the exocomp isn't alive, but because the machine realized it was a test, and thus fixed the problem on its own. So the exocomp *is* alive, but before Data can gloat to anyone in that calm, non-gloaty manner of his, all hell breaks loose on the mining station, and Picard and Geordi get left behind after everyone else is safely beamed back to the *Enterprise*. In order to save the captain and the engineer, Farallon proposes using exocomps to disrupt the beam the station is firing at the planet. This would destroy the exocomps, and Data objects, bringing up the whole "They're really alive" thing. Riker, forced to choose between the lives of crew-members and Data's beliefs, opts for Farallon's plan, only for Data to override system controls and lock down the transporters before they can do anything.

This is a big deal. Data's willful insubordination here is, I think, the most rebellious he's ever been in the entire run of the show, and considering the stakes, it's a shock that he does it so quickly. I'm torn here. On the one hand, there's something more than a little artificial (heh) about how this particular catastrophe comes together, how it puts Data in a position where he either has to break ranks or take part in the slaughter of the closest cousins he's ever known; it feels constructed, and while, yes, obviously, all scripted television is constructed, there's a way to build this sort of dilemma to make it take you by surprise. The fact that the exocomps just happen to be the only possible solution and the fact that using them means killing them is too direct. It smacks of writers imagining how powerful such a moment could be, and then trying to work into it and not quite succeeding.

At the same time, it's such a bold, big choice, I can't help but dig it for that reason alone. The crew of the *Enterprise* sticks together, by and large, and to have one of the show's most trusted heroes stand in the way of an apparently essential rescue mission, creates a level of drama the series rarely aspires to. Admittedly, the fact that there aren't any real consequences to this choice diminish the impact somewhat. Picard and Geordi make it out alive, and the exocomps find a way to save them that means nearly everyone survives. (One exocomp sacrifices itself to allow the others time to escape.) As well, Data isn't court-martialed, shut down, or even formally reprimanded. Picard even compliments Data on his behavior, saying, "It was the most human decision you've ever made." On a show like, say, *Battlestar Galactica*, this would've been yet another sign that everyone was on their own, that even the characters we loved and trusted the most would betray everyone around them if they believed they had just cause. *TNG* can't really support that; nor should it try. But it's nice to see them dabble.

"Quality" isn't a great episode—it's no "Measure of a Man," for instance. It's too contrived, and the almost entirely happy ending plays like something of a cheat, especially considering the lack of fallout from Data's actions. Still, it works pretty well, and I'll take from it the same thing I take from nearly every Data-centric episode: He's perhaps the most alien being anyone on the show has ever come across, even though they work with him every day. He's nice enough. But when he makes a choice, he commits to that choice, and nothing—not weakness, not doubt, not confusion—stops him. There is something equal parts terrifying and inspiring in that, and for all his surface politeness and inability to grasp basic English idiom, Data remains one of *TNG*'s most fascinating leads, and it's all the more impressive that the show sometimes doesn't even seem to realize it.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- "You know, I have always been a little suspicious of men in beards."
- Beverly is something of an unsung MVP in this episode. In addition to the cold open (where her commitment to the premise makes a one-off gag thrown in to explain Levar Burton's continued face moss into something much more entertaining than it has any right to be—and interrupted card game or not, she totally won the argument), her discussion with Data about the nature of life is one of the best scenes in the episode, the sort of fun, impossible to fully resolve conversation that you only really find in science fiction.
- Riker says he's always wanted to see Beverly as a brunette. Space Bets OF THE FUTURE!

"Chain of Command, Part I" (season 6, episode 10, first aired: 12/12/1992)

Or *The One Where The Lights Don't Come Into It Yet*

"You know what the chain of command is? It's the chain I go get and beat you with 'til you understand who's in ruttin' command here!"

-"The Train Job," *Firefly*

So we're finally here, are we? This may be the last of the big episodes that I've been waiting to watch ever since starting this project, so many millenniums ago. No, wait, we've got "Tapestry" coming up this season, I keep hearing how amazing that is, and I'll admit to being curious about "Sub Rosa," as it sounds like the Holocaust and the season one finale of *The Killing* combined. (Too soon?) But the two part "Chain of Command" is definitely a line to be crossed off an ever dwindling list, and while I'm excited to be here (and especially excited about next week's conclusion), I'm a little sad as well. To everything a season, and all that. You realize when you watch a lot of TV that every show has a peak, and that peak is hardly ever the show's final season. Unless it's a series cancelled before its time, like the above quoted Joss Whedon space epic, it's going to hit the heights, and then begin the slow, painful collapse into mediocrity or worse, until the audience dwindles, and it's time for a mercy killing.

But we're not quite there yet, and even if *TNG* has passed its best years (I'd put that at roughly season four, or three—just generally in that middle area, which seems a safe enough bet), there's good to come. Good which includes, among other things, the finale (which I remember liking), and, of course, "Chain." Let's dive in, shall we?

About that quote above—*Firefly* and *TNG* don't see eye-to-eye on a lot of issues. In many ways, Whedon's show was intended as a response to the *Trek* franchise's rose-colored take on unified government and unchecked expansionism; the "Alliance," *Firefly's* Federation analog, is portrayed as a crushing dictatorship, forcing new systems to join up whether they want to or not. But one thing both shows could readily agree on is that bureaucracy sucks. While Federation officials generally appear to be motivated by a desire to do what's best for the organization and, presumably, the universe, that doesn't make the assholes any easier to deal with. And there are a *lot* of assholes.

Like, for instance, Captain Edward Jellico, the man assigned to take over in the *Enterprise* when Starfleet assigns Picard to a super-secret, hush-hush, cross your heart and hope to die mission. Jellico seems like a nice enough guy at first. He's played by Ronny Cox, and, sure, Ronny Cox has played some great villains before. He was a creep in *Robocop* and a slightly smarmier creep in *Total Recall*, but hey, he was the President in Albert Pyun's *Captain America*, which ought to count for something. I started watching "Chain" for the first time without looking at any summary or plot info on the episode. I knew that part II had (spoiler!) torture in it, but apart from that, and the "THERE ARE FOUR LIGHTS" people have been quoting at me ever since I got this assignment, I didn't have much in the way of expectations. So I actually thought Jellico was going to prove an exception to the rule of assholery. I noted how ridiculous it was not to simply give Riker command of the ship, but when Jellico beamed aboard, he was enthusiastic and friendly. "Which is cool," I wrote.

Ah, how naive I was! I should've realized it would all go to hell soon enough, considering how obnoxious Vice-Admiral Nechayev was when issuing orders to Riker on the transfer of power. Jellico is just another in a long line of self-righteous jerks, so thoroughly convinced in his own ability and insight that he refuses any advice or counsel from anyone else on board the ship. He immediately orders the three-shift rotation of the *Enterprise* be switched to four-shifts, and when Riker tries to explain to him how all of the shift-leaders agree that such a switch would be disastrous, he simply repeats the order, with more glaring. He runs combat drills, he makes ridiculous demands on the ship's technical teams, and in general, he behaves like a fool. It's an irritating convention of this show that whenever new personnel are brought on board to help deal with a crisis, that person or persons is almost invariably going to make the problem worse.

The problem here seems bad enough to begin with. Picard, Beverly, and Worf are assigned to create a special ops team, for reasons that only become clear late in the episode: The Cardassians appear to be developing a metagenic weapon, a genetically engineered virus capable of wiping out entire populations in one fell swoop. (It sounds like a bio version of a neutron bomb; all the pesky civilians and soldiers are taken care of, but the buildings and technology remain intact.) Starfleet has detected certain emanations coming off Celtris III, and they believe the

Cardassians have been developing their new (and highly illegal) weapon there. Picard, Beverly, and Worf's job is infiltrate the base, find the weapon, and destroy it.

Which is a little silly, really. Much as I love all three characters, I'm not sure any of them, beyond maybe Worf, are qualified for this kind of mission. Picard has experience with the theta-band waves which are coming off of Celtris III, due to his time on the *Stargazer*; Beverly is a doctor who can search for signs of the virus, and Worf has fists and is Klingon. These are all technically valid reasons, but Picard isn't a young man anymore, and it has to have been years since he or Beverly engaged in this kind of covert action. Worf, I'll accept, because Worf is awesome. But while I firmly believe that Beverly and Picard are also awesome, their awesomeness doesn't exactly lend itself to them running around in caves dressed like Mummenschanz.

Those caveats out of the way, the more I think about "Chain," the more I appreciate it, and the more excited I get about "Part II." (I haven't watched it yet.) Picard's crack suicide squad is a tad ridiculous, yes, but all three actors do their best with the material, and I'm willing to suspend my disbelief long enough to get to the episode's conclusion. The scene where Beverly essentially seduces a Ferengi to get transport to Celtris III is clearly padding and silly padding at that, but I do appreciate how stretching this story to two episodes gave us more time to deal with the rigorous training that all three team-members have to participate in before they embark. Seeing Picard bruised and exhausted after a long day running around the holodeck or seeing Beverly complaining to Troi of her own aches and pains goes a fair way to making all of this make some kind of sense.

As for Jellico, yes, he's abrasive and yes, I don't really understand the logic of Starfleet assigning a new captain to a ship mere days before it engages in a supposedly crucial diplomatic meeting (maybe this is explained better in part 2), but there is something to be said about watching someone rock the boat this determinedly. He does get Troi back into an actual uniform, which, wailing fanboys aside, is really for the best. And the negotiation scenes, where Jellico attempts to strong arm the Cardassian delegation (led by Gul Lemec), are hilariously awkward. I've seen dozens of sequences like this before, where the hero demonstrates his knowledge and will by dominating his opponent through discourtesy and shouting, but here, Jellico's attempts to force Lemec into cowering before his might are a complete shambles. Troi tells Riker midway into the discussions that Jellico isn't at all sure of himself, which tells you nearly everything you know about the character right there; not a bad man, so much as one pushed to a position of stress and authority that he is simply not prepared for. By the end, it appears that the Cardassians are in complete control of the situation, and with a more competent officer running the *Enterprise*, that might not have been the case.

That control is important, because down on Celtris III, everything goes to hell in an instant. Our heroes find the source of the theta-waves, but it's a trap. There's no metagenics laboratory, no lab at all, and the Cardassians attack almost immediately. Beverly and Worf manage to escape, but Picard does not. Which is another win for the Cardassians, the big win, really, because the trap was designed to catch Picard specifically. Now Picard is in the hands of Gul Madred (David Warner), and Madred has a very specific plan for the days to come. He will ask Picard questions, and if Madred doesn't like the answers, the captain will die.

"Chain" is padded in spots; I've railed about the two-part structure before, and it's easy to spot the unnecessary scenes here, as most of the episode seems secondary to Picard's mission and the reveal at the end. But that reveal is so excellent, I can't find it in my heart to rag on the episode that much. Irritating though he may be, Jellico's struggle to do a job he can't quite manage does make for some solid drama. Besides, it's hard to imagine the discovery that Picard (and Starfleet) has been played for a fool all along would have the same impact if we'd learned it at the 20 minute mark. So, I'll go with a B+ for now and keep my fingers crossed that next week's installment will deliver on the promises made here.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- My favorite moment of Jellico Brand Jerkwad is when he tells Picard, "And chances are, you won't be coming back from this mission of yours." And I thought "Break a leg!" was harsh. (And really, if that is the expectation, is this the best use of a senior trained officer whose proven himself invaluable time and time again aboard the *Enterprise*?)
- "Get it done," sounds suspiciously close to "Get 'r done," which is painful.
- I'd like to formally request a stoppage of all scenes in which any non-Ferengi successfully seduces a Ferengi. It's just not pleasant.

Next week: We watch *TNG* put its money where its mouth is with "Chain of Command, Part II," then spend some time on the holodeck with an old friend in "Ship in a Bottle."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Chain Of Command, Part 2"/"Ship In A Bottle"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[7/07/11 10:00AM](#)

"Chain of Command, Part 2" (season 6, episode 11, first aired: 12/19/1992)

Or The One Where There Are Lights

I covered the last two seasons of *24* for the TV Club. It wasn't the best writing I've done for the site, not by a long shot. By its seventh and eighth "Day," *24* had lost the spark that made its earlier seasons such a rush, leaving behind a lot of empty-headed posturing, bad plot-twists, and, of course, torture. I wasn't sure how to respond. For one thing, it's damnably difficult to review individual episodes of a show that's designed as a continuous narrative. But for another, without its energy and intensity, *24* was just a show with politics I didn't much agree with, and it got tedious for me to simply reiterate every week, "Really? Really?". Kiefer Sutherland was great, and there was the occasional twist or action sequence to keep me going, but generally, it was a drag, and the readers were understandably frustrated by my inability to bring anything of interest to the table.

Torture was a part of *24* from the start, but by the end of the show, thanks to outside commentators and the series' creators presumably exaggerated notions of their own philosophical wisdom, it wasn't simply a story-telling device, it was a thematic statement. Jack Bauer, whose willingness to maim anyone necessary in the name of freedom had saved a fictional US half a dozen times, was forced again and again to defend his actions, and again and again, he demonstrated that his methods, while morally questionable, got results, and results were what mattered. It made for some uncomfortable viewing to anyone who couldn't share the same view: a profoundly silly show attempting to align itself with some profoundly unsilly real-world issues. And me, being both a coward and blowhard, was never able to decide if my job was to just talk about plot points, or to actually draw out the very clear signals the series was sending. The latter tack enraged commenters; the former made me feel somehow ashamed.

It's nice, then, that the second part of "Chain of Command" fits in so well with my weak-willed, soft-hearted liberal sensibilities. Not that that's much of a surprise; it's hard to imagine *TNG* throwing out a "torture is delightful!" episode, especially not by now in its run. What is a surprise is how effective this episode is, even going in with high expectations and following a solid, if not all that remarkable, first half. "Chain" handily wins itself into the pantheon of all-time best *Trek* episodes (yes, I mean the entire franchise), and it's a big part of this show's legacy as "Yesterday's *Enterprise*" or "The Inner Light." But where both those episodes, and indeed, most of *TNG*'s best eps, speak to the resiliency of life and the importance of respect and courage, "Chain" acknowledges that there are some forces even courage and resiliency can't overcome without help. It's a criticism of torture which also doesn't deny the power one person can have over another, and the strength of its message comes from the acceptance that even the best can be broken, but that doesn't make them weak.

Before we get to the heavier stuff, though, we might as well deal with Captain Jerkwad Jellico, who—actually is a bit more interesting than I may have given him credit for. Where part one was all about him making everyone on board the *Enterprise* uncomfortable, creating drama to distract us from when the real show began, here Jellico largely gets down to the business of kicking ass. Admittedly, he still makes time to take Riker off active duty for insubordination, but, well, Jellico may have a point here. Riker's concern for Picard's safety is praiseworthy, but his sudden willingness to throw all other concerns to the side is unprofessional and ill-suited to the task at hand. It's also somewhat uncharacteristic of Riker, who's shown himself willing to put his duty first many times before. You could chalk it up to Number One being so fed up with Jellico's general behavior that he decides to draw a line, or else inconsistent character writing, but either way, it's hard to fault Jellico too much for putting Riker on the sidelines.

This is especially true when you consider that Jellico is, in the end, largely responsible for getting Picard back safe and sound in the process of thwarting the Cardassians. Sure, Geordi and Riker go on the hardcore shuttle mission to secretly plant mines on the Cardassian fleet, but that mine planting is Jellico's idea, and the new captain even chokes down his pride long enough to ask for Riker's help in the maneuver. That scene in particular muddies the water in the relationship between Jellico and his reluctant first mate, because while everything Riker says to him is right (we can argue all you like, but attempting to force new command routines on a working system mere days before that system is thrown under pressure is just not good thinking), Riker still comes off as much an ass as Jellico does, perhaps even more so.

Really, though, while this section of the episode has some good moments (including the sight of Data in a first officer's uniform!), it's not really what anyone remembers about "Chain," and for good reason. The centerpiece of the ep is the battle of wills between Picard and his captor/torturer Gul Madred (David Warner). The entire ruse we learned about last week with metagenic weapons was designed to lure Picard into the hands of Cardassians. They're real intentions are an assault on Minos Korva, a Federation planet near the Demilitarized Zone, and they know that, in the event of such an attack, the *Enterprise* would be the ship at the head of Korva's defense. Madred's job is to break Picard on the presumption that Picard knows information about how the Federation intends to defend the planet.

Picard doesn't. What's more, the episode dispenses with the question of whether or not Picard will give Madred the information he requires straightaway. In their first scene, Picard is heavily drugged, and responds truthfully and quickly to every question he's asked. He gives them his name, where he was born, and spills the point of his mission to Celtris III, as well as the names of the two people who accompanied him. Instead of making the episode about Picard's ability to withhold information under duress, "Chain" demonstrates up front that the question is, when it comes to torture, essentially irrelevant. When asked about defense measures for Minos Korva, Picard says he has no knowledge of them, and this is the truth. But the torture continues throughout the episode, because the point isn't information. The point is the breaking.

In harrowing sequence after sequence, Madred calmly sets to work taking apart Picard's defenses, his sense of self, his dignity. Even Picard's perception of reality is up for grabs. There are four lights behind Madred's desk. The Cardassian turns them on, and asks Picard how many lights he sees. When Picard tells him the obvious, Madred uses a device inserted in Picard's body earlier in the episode (between scenes) to inflict great physical pain. Because Picard no longer has the right to perceive the world as it is; his perceptions are to be dictated by the one who's really in control. There's a line from Orwell's *1984* that I kept thinking of, watching this (and really, this whole sequence shares a fair amount with Winston's gradual undoing in the Ministry of Love)—"Freedom is the right to say $2 + 2 = 4$." Freedom is getting to say the truth, without fear of consequences because it *is* the truth. Madred's goal is to take this right from Picard. It's not a matter of simple capitulation, but total dominance. For Madred to succeed, Picard mustn't just say "There are five lights" when there are four. He must believe there *are* five lights, because that is what Madred tells him to believe.

"Chain" succeeds in no small part due to the strength of its performances. Patrick Stewart is, unsurprisingly, excellent, enduring humiliation and conveying distress with heartbreaking sincerity. David Warner more than holds his own. Warner is a terrific character actor, and has played the villain more than a few times before, most notably as Evil in *Time Bandits* and Jack the Ripper in *Time After Time*, but Madred trades in Evil's sneers and Jack's basic madness for something subtler, and more unnerving. The conversations between Picard and Madred are often cool, composed, even distantly pleasant, a chat between relative equals during a business lunch. Warner conveys Madred's conviction in his actions, his belief that the degradation and destruction of Jean-Luc Picard are a key part of the maintenance of the Cardassian state, only betraying his emotions when Picard sees through to his embittered, angry heart.

There are plenty of great moments here, and again and again I was amazed at how raw this all felt, how utterly unlike regular *TNG*. The safety nets were gone; from the start, it's clear that Picard is going to suffer, and that he won't be released from that suffering till the end of the episode, and we're just going to have to deal with that. Of course Picard manages to display some moral fortitude and righteousness. During a casual conversation about his childhood, Madred reveals he was beaten for food in his youth, and Picard realizes that the torture is just an extension of that beating. There's no knowledge to be gained here, no advantage. Madred is just taking revenge on the ones who wronged him, finding his own sense of power by slowly and methodically destroying another.

It's a revelation that could seem facile, but Warner and Stewart make it work. As well, the scene succeeds in the context of the episode because, while it gives Picard a much needed "win" moment, demonstrating that it's possible to hold onto some piece of himself through all he's endured to that point, it effectively changes nothing. Madred doesn't break down and let Picard go, and Picard never finds some way to escape his tormentors and win his freedom. In the end, Madred offers Picard a choice: he can spend the rest of his life in comfort and pleasure, or he can continue down his current path of suffering and pain, for a slow, meaningless death. All he has to do to win the former is tell Madred he sees five lights, not four. Picard hesitates, but before he can answer, other Cardassians arrive as a result of Jellico's ploy, and Picard is informed he's to be released. "There are four lights!" he shouts before he goes, finally defeating his captor.

Except... he didn't, really. Whenever anyone references "Chain" these days, the four lights line is what people remember, because it's the easiest element of the episode to remember, and because we can use it as an example of Picard's will. But that's forgetting the long pause before the other Cardassians arrived, and it's forgetting what Picard tells Troi at the very end of the episode, having returned to his command of the *Enterprise* slightly worse for wear. In that last moment alone with Madred, Picard would've given in if they hadn't been interrupted. "But more than that," he says, "I believed that I could see five lights." Everyone can be broken, given enough time. It doesn't even require that much skill. We're all meat and nerves and soft tissue, and we all have our limits, and there's no weakness in admitting yours. It's what makes us human, and it's what makes freedom from oppression (and a refusal to

oppress in turn) so valuable. It's impressive that *TNG* would deal with such an unpleasant and unsettling subject, but the show's willingness to be honest when a lie would be so much more comforting is what makes this great art.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- Apparently, the torture sequences in this episode were inspired by *Closetland*, a 1991 film starring Madeline Stowe and Alan Rickman. I've been meaning to see that for years, although I may wait a few weeks now.
- That is Patrick Stewart hanging naked when Madred has Picard's clothes stripped off. The man commits.
- "How many lights do you see?" "I see four lights." "No. There are five."
- This pretty much ruins any other scene in the series where a character was tortured, doesn't it.
- Dick or no, how awesome was Riker's shit-eating grin when he had Jellico at his mercy? "I won't order you to fly this mission." <cue grin> "Then ask me."
- "In spite of all you've done to me, I find you a pitiable man."

"Ship in a Bottle" (season 6, episode 12, first aired: 1/23/1993)

Or The One Where the Monster Demands a Mate

And now for something completely different.

Our second holodeck-centric episode in, what, two weeks? Three? And blah blah, the holodeck is nonsense, ridiculous it should still be on the hip, and it's treated far too cavalierly by all involved. Let's just get that right out of the way, because "Ship" is actually a lot of fun (especially after the darkness of "Chain"), and more than earns the suspension of disbelief required to enjoy it. This is a very clever episode, and it's clever in the most fun way possible, creating puzzles without telegraphing their solutions and relying on the audience to keep pace with some surprisingly complex ideas. As well, it gives us the best kind of villain—someone who's resourceful, smarter than our heroes give him credit for, easy to empathize with, but not all powerful. Even better, the villain is a familiar face: a character from one of *TNG*'s few strong season two episodes, one whose story we had no real reason to believe we'd be returning to, but whose return here makes perfect sense.

In "Elementary, Dear Data," Geordi asked the *Enterprise* computer to create a holodeck opponent that would be capable of defeating Data in a game of crime and punishment. Data and Geordi had been playing at Sherlock and Watson, only Geordi wasn't impressed by Data's deductive abilities—the android wasn't solving mysteries as much as he was remembering the details of Arthur Conan Doyle's stories and applying them as needed. So, Geordi decided to the up the stakes, and Moriarty (Daniel Davis) was born, the reincarnation of Holmes's greatest foe. Except Moriarty was just fiendishly smart, he was so smart that he was able to deduce the limited realities of his own existence, a program that became self-aware. There was a bit of struggle, Dr. Polaski was briefly kidnapped, and in the end, Picard stepped in, assuring Moriarty that he and the brightest minds of the Federation would get to work to find a way for the holographic human to step into the real world.

Jump four years ahead, and Geordi and Data are back to elementarying and game afooting to beat the band. The cold open has a standard "Sherlock pulls together all the evidence scene," except that in Data's triumphant moment, a flaw in the system undoes his reasoning. The holodeck is having problem with spatial relationships, which turns a left-handed character (a character who needs to be left-handed for the story to properly resolve) into a right-handed one. Showing an attention to detail and a foresight which is relatively unheard of when it comes to dealings with the holodeck, Data notes the problem, and gets Barclay to look over the system. In the process of trying to find the

problem, Barclay stumbles over a few lines of blocked memory, releases them, and Moriarty pops back in to existence, politely indomitable as ever, and more than a little miffed at being put off for so long.

I remember enjoying Davis's first appearance on the show, and he's a lot of fun here as well. What makes the character so effective is he's a mixture of two sci-fi staples: the Frankenstein monster demanding the rights of the living from a creator who doesn't know what to do with him; and a brilliant criminal mastermind. This version of Moriarty isn't evil, and he certainly isn't a patch on his literary inspiration in terms of diabolical intent, but this is the skill-set that the computer has given him. His goal is understandable, and, in its way, admirable: the goal of all sentient life, to be allowed the freedom to aspire to his own destiny. (Or something along those lines. Basically, he wants to get laid and go on a nice vacation, buy, y'know, poetical.) Picard isn't able to grant him this desire, through no fault of the captain's own, and Moriarty responds in the only way he knows how: by taking over the ship and holding it hostage until Picard gives him what he wants. Which Picard can't do, because of those pesky laws of physics.

So, we've got the right construction for good conflict, with Moriarty's irresistible force meeting reality's immovable object. "Ship" handles this conflict by introducing a magic trick, and then taking its sweet time to reveal how the trick was done. Moriarty's apparent exit from the holodeck is a great moment, even if you already know the secret of what's happening, because it plays so wonderfully with our expectations. Picard has demonstrated to Moriarty how a seemingly solid object on the holodeck vanishes the instant it hits the real world, but Moriarty determines to walk out the door anyway, arguing that consciousness overrides intangibility. Now, we know that Moriarty isn't just going to disappear; you can't just bring back a major character and vanish him ten minutes into the episode, without any sort of storyline to take his place. But we also know that Moriarty can't simply leave, because that violates one of the show's core principles. We can have magic aliens, we can have god-like beings, but what happens on the holodeck stays on the holodeck.

Moriarty "escape," then, is a kind of surprise that sci-fi shows (especially one this long in the tooth) rarely get to pull off. We're trained to expect time travel and wormholes and monsters, but this is, apparently, breaking one of the rules of the reality we've been presented. Even better, Picard is astounded by what he sees, which sells the trick—he's as amazed as we are, and his constant refrain to Moriarty that they have no idea what just happened helps keep the heart of the illusion a secret for longer than it might have been. See, Moriarty doesn't actually exit the holodeck; he just creates a program inside the holodeck to make it *look* like he's leaving, a program that recreates every other crewmember on board the ship who isn't Picard, Data, or Barclay. And while Picard and the others scramble to find a way to help Moriarty's beloved Countess follow him off the holodeck, Moriarty holds them hostage, even tricking Picard into giving up his access codes so that Moriarty can take control of both the ship in his simulation *and* the real one.

Yes, we could nitpick here. It's an impressive that the ruse lasts as long as it does, and a little unnerving. Data realizes what's going on when he discovers that the fake Geordi, like the character from the Holmes story earlier, is left-handed instead of right-handed. Which means that neither he, Barclay, nor Picard noticed anything different in the personalities of their friends and co-workers. Admittedly they were under some stress and shock at the time, but it's maybe stretching credulity that the computer would be able to recreate everyone else *quite* so well. Bringing fictional characters to life is one thing, but mimicking the conversational patterns of those nearest and dearest to you? I'll buy it, but I can see having problems with it. Also, it's odd that nobody simply tries to repeat their earlier successes when Moriarty asks Picard to bring the Countess out. Picard resists, in typical Frankenstein fashion, because he doesn't want to move forward before they understand the ramifications of what they've inadvertently accomplished. But once Moriarty holds the ship hostage, why not just ask the Countess to walk off the holodeck like her mate? Couldn't hurt to try.

But like I said, these are nitpicks. I enjoyed "Ship," because it uses the holodeck in a way I don't think we've seen before, and because Moriarty's a great character. And man, that ending is just so cool. Picard and the others simply turn Moriarty's game back on him, and program the holodeck inside the holodeck to make yet a third *Enterprise*, one where both Moriarty and the Countess can leave the confines of their electronic cell, and spend the rest of their lives traveling the galaxy. Maybe it's a little too neat, a little too convenient, but it's such a good-natured ending that I can't really look at it too hard. Moriarty can't really get what he wants (I remember the Doctor on *Voyager* wandering around outside Sick Bay, but that may just have been because Robert Picardo is awesome), but, instead of being destroyed or exiled back to electronic oblivion, he gets what he needs: universes to explore, and a charming, beautiful companion at his side. As sequels go, this was a fine conclusion to an idea that deserved a second chance.

Grade: A-

Stray Observations:

- Interesting use of Barclay in this episode—he doesn't really do anything, but it's nice to have him around. (And he gets a great last line.)
- I love listening to Patrick Stewart and Daniel Davis talk at each other. The enunciation is *intense*.
- Faux-Geordi: "He's brilliant in any century." Also, a bit of an egotist.

Next week: Geordi does some investigating of his own in "Aquiël," and Deanna looks in the mirror and finds the "Face of the Enemy."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Aquiël"/"Face Of The Enemy"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[7/14/11 10:00AM](#)

"Aquiël" (season 6, episode 13, originally aired: 1/30/1993)

or *The One Where Geordi Meets The Thing*

Sometimes you make an emotional connection to a person, or a piece of art (or entertainment, if we want to avoid getting all snobby about it) that far outweighs that art's objective value. Admittedly, "objective value" is hard to pin down when it comes to stories, because there really are no hard and fast rules for setting standards. But if I were to tell you that I have a certain affection for *Tango & Cash*, a terribly silly Sylvester Stallone/Kurt Russell action movie in which Russell dresses in drag at one point and Stallone is supposed to be "the smart one," I certainly wouldn't expect you to rush out and buy a copy. Nor would I put much effort into defending the merits of the film, even if I've seen it half a dozen times at least. People always get awkward and over-contemplative whenever the subject of conversation turns to guilty pleasures, but I think the phrase really just means "this is something I like a lot, and I have no idea why."

I don't think I'd go so far as to say I like "Aquiël." It's a weird episode, one that establishes a mystery and that resolves it via a solution that comes perilously close to cheating. It's also another awkward electronic meet-cute for Geordi, and once again, the writers of *TNG* show themselves largely incapable of creating a romantic relationship that doesn't come off as really, really creepy. This is probably the weakest I've seen of season 6, a bunch of awkward story ideas mashed together with some weird character behavior and an unintentionally funny ending. But I have to confess something; while I don't really like this episode, I also have a certain affection for it, for reasons that don't have a lot to do with the ep itself. I don't think that affection affected my critical judgment (if anything, I

was harder on this *because* I remembered parts of it so well), but, hey I thought I'd mention it. "Aquiël" is the first show I ever remember stealing from.

Right, so I've mentioned I decided I was going to be a writer when I was eleven, right? Stephen King novel, wandering tortured genius, not much of a juggler—I'm sure you've heard a thousand times before. The first thing I ever wrote (okay, not the *first* thing, not even the first *fictional* thing, because I also did this great story when I was really young about a magic bat, only the magic was in the kid who had the bat *the entire time*, so I guess this whole digression is based on a lie, since I'd already stolen from *Dumbo* when I was, like, eight, but we'll just push forward anyway) was a short story called "Poe," about Edgar Allan Poe's typewriter, and his ghost who wanted to murder the descendant of the guy who beat him to death. It wasn't very good, but it had a beginning, a middle, and an end. But I didn't know what to do next. Until I watched "Aquiël."

The *Enterprise* is on a mission to deliver supplies to Relay Station 47, but when they arrive at the station, they find it empty of personnel. The station *should* have two Starfleet officers, Lt. Aquiël Unhari (Renee Jones) and Keith Rocha, but instead, there's a dog, and a strange blob of genetic material that may be someone's remains. There's also a suspicious absence of shuttlecraft. Beverly finds some dried blood, and determines that it's Aquiël's, but she doesn't know who the blob used to be. So Geordi, after poking around, gets access to Aquiël's personal logs, and he starts watching the logs to try and put together what happened to her and Rocha. And, because he's Geordi (and because this part of the episode is doing a little stealing of its own), he starts falling in love with what he sees.

That's the part that struck me, when I was twelve or so. Not the romance part, but the idea of someone trying to piece together a story through the subjective accounts of the people who were no longer around to answer questions. The idea isn't original to *TNG*, but I didn't know that. And for whatever reason, I decided that I was going to write my own story, stealing the set-up (guy comes to a seemingly empty space station, starts watching video logs), and then making up my own ending. There was a robot, and it was terrible. Just godawful, but I was 12, so that was my excuse, and at least ending made some sense within the context of the world I'd clumsily created. Sure, there were crazy plot holes, and nearly every idea was ripped off of *Trek* or Isaac Asimov, but at least you knew there was a robot on the station at the start of the story. I didn't pull that whole robot thing out of thin air, is what I'm saying.

"Aquiël" goes a different route, and that route makes an already uneven and forced episode appear even shoddier. The locked-room-ish mystery isn't a bad hook for a genre show, and while the possibilities of space travel make the intended claustrophobia of the premise less restrictive, I was curious throughout the episode as to how they would explain the absence of crew-members on the station, and the presence of that organic goo. And to its credit, "Aquiël" does do a decent job of keeping you guessing right up till the end. There are Klingons hanging around, which always complicates matters, and the information Geordi finds in Aquiël's logs doesn't clear things up one way or the other. He develops an almost instant attraction to the presumed dead crew-member, because, well, of course he does. This is Geordi, after all, and the show refuses to allow him even the slightest sliver of dignity when it comes to romance. But there are aspects of Aquiël's personal journal that are troubling. She had significant problems working with Rocha, and while she seems harmless enough, who knows where those problems might have led?

I think we're supposed to find the character charming, but I didn't. She has all the earmarks of someone who's supposed to be quirky and offbeat and passionate, which in real life would mostly just translate to insufferable and unstable. But hey, maybe *that's* the intention. We're definitely supposed to suspect she's capable of murder, or at least some kind of violence, and it is, admittedly, hard to create a character out of thin air who has chemistry with one of the ensemble and also appeals to the audience. I guess my problem here is that I found Aquiël off-putting throughout the episode, and not in an entertaining way. I wanted her to be the killer at the end, even though I was pretty sure she wouldn't be; not because that would necessarily make for a better story (although it certainly would've made for a better story than what we ended up with), but because I wanted some sort of justification for

her creepiness. Instead, she gets a friendly send-off from Geordi, after the two of them have *Demolition Man*-style sex.

Oh, right, I forget to mention: Aquiel isn't dead after all! She just passed out, and was rescued by the Klingons, who return her to the *Enterprise* as proof that they didn't murder her. Only, she doesn't remember what happened in her final moments on the relay station, which doesn't exactly clear her name, and when Riker goes digging into personnel records, he finds she has a history of causing problems and rejecting authority. Rocha's record, on the other hand, is spotless. So here we do get some justification for all the bad vibes Aquiel was sending out earlier. Her personality type is clear enough, and it's one I'm sure we've all had to deal with at some point or another: the "free-spirit" who's basically just irresponsible and flighty and prone to blaming other people whenever her work isn't done on time.

Okay, that may be the stodgiest sentence I've ever written. We don't ever see Aquiel working with anyone, so it's possible that she's been misunderstood or ill-represented. At the very least, though, the records Riker finds suggest Aquiel isn't particularly stable, and her behavior around Geordi doesn't contradict this. After being initially bothered that Geordi went through her private recordings, Aquiel quickly (and accurately) realizes that Geordi is the only person on the *Enterprise* willing to defend her from accusations of murder. Either that, or she's charmed by his directness and honesty—either way, she starts getting closer to him, which in turn makes Geordi even firmly on her side, reservations or no. And that, of course, means that at some point, someone has to pull Geordi aside and tell him that his emotions are clouding his judgment; in this case, it's Riker, but it really could've been anyone.

This whole plotline is an odd fit for the show—it's basically *Basic Instinct* or any of a dozen other movies where a lawyer or a cop got too close to his or her potentially guilty client. (The writers themselves realized this, as they changed the ending of the episode to avoid direct comparisons.) Only, Geordi isn't a prosecutor, and he certainly doesn't have any legal obligation in this case. Really, who does at this point? How does Starfleet handle murder investigations, and is it Picard's responsibility to make some kind of final call regarding her guilt or innocence? I'm sure there's some procedure built in, and I suppose the *Enterprise* is obligated to investigate once they realize potential Klingon involvement. But that still can't really support the sort of sexy, tense shenanigans this scenario is designed to create. Much as I dislike Aquiel, it seems out of character for everyone on the ship but Geordi to side against her. Our heroes always err on the side of trust, so their eagerness to jump to conclusions comes off more as an attempt to generate false tension between Geordi's obligations and his desires. Which isn't to say that his relationship with Aquiel is healthy or reasonable. Almost as soon as she's on board the ship, she's sneaking back to the station to delete some of her more incendiary logs. Geordi finds out, and lectures her how bad this looks, and her protestations sound hollow—the entire conversation could've come from something like *Double Indemnity* or *Body Heat*. And then the two of them hook up using this magical stone which is supposed to increase the mental and emotional connection of a couple, because that's normal, right?

All of this would make a decent amount of sense if it turned out that Aquiel really was the killer. It still wouldn't *work*, mind you, but at least we'd have some justification for the off-putting nature of these scenes if we knew Aquiel was hiding a guilty conscience. Instead, in the last ten minutes of the episode, Beverly discovers that the puddle of goo on the station floor didn't actually come from a human, or from any other traditional sentient life form. It's actually cast off from a kind of body-snatcher organism—presumably, it had taken Rocha's shape before Rocha arrived at the station, and then decided it wanted to jump to another host. There's some hemming and hawing as to what form the coalescent (as Beverly describes it) eventually took, but it's the dog. Not Aquiel, not one of the Klingons, but the dog Geordi found on the station at the start of the episode. So, yeah, the weakest choice there, on a plot twist which comes to late to be anything but tacked on. Geordi and Aquiel have one last conversation, in which she turns down his offer to join up with the *Enterprise* crew. It's all supposedly to be very pleasant, but the subtext screams, "You did what I needed you to do, but I'm moving on now."

Just a weird, weird episode all around, and normally one I wouldn't give a second thought to. It sticks in my mind now because I associate it with an important time in my life, but even viewed through the lens of nostalgia, this is weak, with all the hallmarks of bad writing: characters behaving against type (why the hell is Geordi so drawn to Aquiel, anyway?), and a story in which the most interesting concepts are ill-defined.

Grade: C

Stray Observations:

- It seems like whenever someone on TV says, "She has a quirky sense of humor," it translates to, "I would like to have sex with that, please."
- We do get a nice scene in which Worf stares a Klingon Governor down.
- Aquiel is Haliian, an alien race so different from humans that they have slight bumps on their foreheads.

"Face of the Enemy" (season 6, episode 14, originally aired: 2/6/1993)

Or The One Where Troi Meets The Enemy And She Is It

This is another frustrating episode—more so, even, than "Aquiel," because where "Aquile" seemed misguided from the start, "Face of the Enemy" had a fair bit of potential. And it manages to achieve quite a bit of that potential, really. Troi gets to take a much more active role in the proceedings than she usually does; we get to hear more about Spock's efforts to bring peace to Romulus, albeit without any commentary from the Vulcan himself; and the episode resolution is clever and unexpected. Really, that Troi is the main character here is the big deal, especially considering that at no point in this episode does she fall in love with or become seduced by an ambassador. Hell, she doesn't establish a romantic interest in anyone, and she's even called on to be forceful, quick-thinking, and driven.

So why don't I love this episode? Looking back at it now, a little less than two days after watching it, I feel like I *should* have loved it, or at least liked it more than I do. The episode tries to make Troi credible, and Sirtis certainly isn't terrible at doing what she's called on to do here. But "Face" just wasn't plausible enough for me to buy into the story, and I spent most of the ep expecting a final twist that never came. Arguably, that's more my fault than the episode's; it's not responsible for my expectations, after all. But I'm the reviewer you're stuck with, so all I can do is try and explain my reaction as best I can. If "Aquiel" benefited (marginally) from nostalgia, "Face" suffers for not being as complicated as I hoped it would be—although the fact that I was hoping for those complications may tell you something.

Troi wakes up in a dark room, and when she finally gets the lights on, she sees from her reflection in the mirror that she's been surgically altered to look like a Romulan officer. (And a terribly cute one at that.) Before she can get her bearings, another Romulan, a *real* Romulan, bursts into her room, telling her she's part of a vital mission, that he works with Spock and that they kidnapped Troi from a conference and altered her so she could help them get some precious cargo off a Romulan warbird into Federation space. All Troi has to do, this N'Vek (Scott MacDonald) tells her, is pretend to be one of the elite Romulan officers known as the Tal Shiar, and order Commander Toreth (Carolyn Seymour, whose played a Romulan before, as well as the head scientist back in "First Contact") the warbird's captain, to take them to the Kaleb sector, and everything else will fall into place.

Understandably, Troi doesn't quite know how to handle this situation, especially given that she knows little about the Tal Shiar, or about Romulan culture in general (at least I think she doesn't; if I remember right, Romulans are still fairly unknown quantities to the Federation?). As well, Toreth is a stern, unforgiving leader, and one not accustomed to being ordered around on her own ship. But Troi catches on quickly, and, in a nice change of pace from the character's usual behavior, takes control of the ship as best she can, barking orders and using intimidation tactics when the rest of the crew shows reluctance to follow her. And it's a good thing she works fast, too, because the cargo

N'Vek is using her to transport is especially critical: a high-level member of the Romulan government who has chosen to defect to the Federation.

So far, so good, and like I said, I really feel like I should appreciate this more than I do, after all this time complaining that Troi is by far *TNG*'s most useless character. Only—I don't buy her involvement here. It just seems like such a random, poorly thought out plan, to the point that I spent most of the ep expecting to learn near the end that N'Vek was actually playing Troi for a fool. I suppose the justification that it was easier to grab her than anybody else on the *Enterprise*, given that she was attending a conference, should be enough. And it makes sense that Spock would want them to find someone from Picard's ship, given that he already has a relationship there. But... Troi? And to not give her any sense of what she was doing until maybe five minutes before she actually had to pull it off is bizarre. I suppose it's to create more suspense, that Spock and the others' efforts are so tenuous that they need to resort to this kind of desperate play to have a chance of working out. But it's all very artificial, like one of those dreams when you wander into a class final without being able to remember ever having been in class before.

Still, if you can buy into that (and this could very well be something that irks me in particular, and not a more general flaw of the episode), it is exciting to see Troi bashing in heads. The episode milks a lot of tension out of her butting up against a suspicious-but-can't-prove-anything Toreth, and there's something to be said for having two women vying for power without their gender being relevant in the slightest. (Troi doesn't mention chocolate. Not once.) And as improbably as the set-up is, the seat of the pants feeling works well for "Face" as a whole, because there's a definite sense of risk here. We know intellectually the show isn't going to kill Troi off, but her mission could easily fail, and the fact that she's working without a safety net, on a mission that no one back on the *Enterprise* even knows about, raises the stakes considerably.

There's also the fact that Troi never really knows how far she can trust anyone, not even the ever-demanding N'Vek. Halfway through the ep, the Romulans encounter the Corvallen ship that's supposed to take N'Vek's cargo and deliver it to the *Enterprise*. Within a few moments of conversation, Troi realizes the Corvallens are lying, and when she whispers this to N'Vek, his response is to *fire on and destroy the ship*. This upsets Toreth, because no commander likes having someone else fire her ship's weapons without her authorization, but if anything, it's even more upsetting to Troi, who had no idea N'Vek would react with such immediate violence. At first, I thought this meant we were going to find out later on that N'Vek was working some other angle, but he stays true to Troi right up until the moment he gets phased out of existence.

Which, the more I think about it, is actually cool. I mean, how often do shows acknowledge that just because everybody is working for the good guys, that doesn't mean they all have the same idea of how to get the job done? N'Vek reacts like he does because he's a Romulan, and that's what Romulans do—they don't have maybes, just "save" or "destroy." We get this helpfully explained to us in "Face"'s other plotline back on the *Enterprise*. The ship picks up a Federation member who had defected to the Romulans twenty years ago, before realizing he'd made some bad choices and defecting back. (Re-defecting? De-defecting?) Ensign Deseve is a stiff looking dude, with larger breasts than you usually get on a man, but he's able to articulate the appeal of Romulan culture, as well as his disenchantment with that culture, very clearly: the Romulans answer every question "yes" or "no," and that's appealing when you're a young man, stuck in a Starfleet full of people constantly trying not to step on each other's toes. But when he got older, Deseve realized that "maybe" has its place as well. It's a pleasantly complex idea—while Deseve is carrying his own message from Ambassador Spock, there's never any suggestion that he's going to go unpunished for his defection. But he came back anyway, knowing the cost.

If it sounds like I'm talking myself into liking this episode more than I thought I did, well, I'm pretty sure that's what's happening. Which must be terribly exciting, I know. But the more I think about it, the more it seems to me that my false apprehension of where the story was headed did "Face" a disservice. I haven't even gotten to the cool

ending. Toreth's ship finally runs into the *Enterprise* (after Troi cleverly works out a way to let the *Enterprise* track the ship even while it's cloaked), and Troi takes the bridge to communicate to Captain Picard directly. She says some things that sound like they may be code words, but don't have to be, and convinces Picard to lower his ship's shields. Then Troi orders N'Vek to fire on the *Enterprise*—only the weapon he fires is at the lowest setting, and really serves as a smoke screen so N'Vek can transport the Romulan cargo directly to the *Enterprise*'s bridge. It works beautifully, only Toreth immediately recognizes the ruse, and N'Vek is killed. Troi survives only because the Romulan ship has to drop its shields when it cloaks, allowing Worf to beam the counselor back to the *Enterprise* at the last second.

I'm sure there are problems I'm overlooking, just as I was almost certainly overly hard on the episode the first time I watched it. That happens from time to time. But really, I think we can all agree that it's a relief to see Troi getting to be more than a victim. While the episode never explicitly stats it (that I can remember), her empathic abilities would be helpful for this kind of espionage work, as it would allow her to fine-tune her performance based off the emotions of the people she was trying to fool, so for once, that power seems useful rather than an after-thought. I'm going to grade this conservatively, as I can't shake the feeling that it didn't entirely work, but I would like to watch this one again sometime. At the very least, it shows that Troi really isn't useless, even if the way the show uses her so often is.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- According to Memory Alpha, this is the last time Spock's efforts on Romulus were mentioned in the franchise until the 2009 *Star Trek* movie. This seems like a waste.
- I'm going to go out on a limb and assume we never hear about the defecting Romulans again, either.

Next week: We trip the light fantastic with "Tapestry," and Worf investigates his "Birthright, Part 1." (There are a lot of two-parters this season!)

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Tapestry"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[7/21/11 10:00AM](#)

Note: You'll notice I've only reviewed one episode this week. The truth is, I'm sick as a dog, and I don't have the energy for the usual double feature. This works out well enough, since it means we'll be doing both parts of "Birthright" in the same review, but it does mean this week's piece is shorter than usual, and for that, I apologize.

"Tapestry"

Or The One Where Picard Learns The True Meaning Of Getting Stabbed In The Back

I don't have a lot of regrets in my life. There's only a couple I can think of: I wish I'd handled money better when I was still in college, and that I'd understood the perils of taxation and freelancing back when I started this job. Oh, and I also wish I hadn't eaten so much crap food in college, because then I wouldn't have had to spend two or three years getting into passable shape. I'm 32 years old, and as regrets go, neither of those are all that dramatic. I'm not even sure they qualify for the word "regret"—to me, that word always implied a level of sadness and a sense of permanent damage that being in debt and a bit on the chubby side don't really create. I'm lucky, really, in that I've led a largely sheltered life, with few opportunities or reasons to hurt or be hurt on a grand scale. But I've still gone through some rough patches, and I've still done some amazingly stupid things that made those rough patches worse than they needed to be.

I just don't regret doing those stupid things, or making the choices that led me to those actions, because "regret" implies a desire to change the past, and I can't see the percentage in that. By and large, I like where I am now, and to sincerely wish that, say, I'd gone out with this girl in school instead of pining for that one, or if I'd moved someplace else after college or if I'd chosen a different career path, would be to risk losing what I have. If this sounds like

wisdom, well, it might be, but it's certainly not earned. It's as much a way to give the bad times in my life meaning as it is a philosophy. There are, perhaps, different paths I could've taken earlier on, knowing what I know now, that might've conspired to raise my station about its current semi-lofty position. But if I could somehow arrange for this to happen, even if I successfully navigated the currents of the past—I would no longer be me. And however awful things get, and however much I might dislike myself, I wouldn't care for that at all.

That's the essential message of "Tapestry," and if it takes Captain Picard longer to arrive at the same conclusion that I've taken as writ my whole life, well, he has a history with death toll, which isn't really anything I can compete with. The premise: Picard is dying. There's a lot of talk in the cold open about Lenarians and weapons fire and so forth, but what it comes down to is, Picard's in Sick Bay, he's close to death, and his artificial heart is to blame. While Beverly hovers over him, Picard wakes up in a seemingly infinite white space, alone but for a single, glowing figure. Picard approaches the figure, takes its hand—and Q comes into focus. "Welcome to the afterlife, Jean-Luc. You're dead." After the usual pleasantries (Picard doesn't believe what's happening, Q insists), Q badgers Picard into confessing his great regret in life: the fight with Nausicaans that resulted in the chest wound that gave him the artificial heart which seems to have cost Picard his life. (Picard told Wesley the story all the way back in season two's "Samaritan Snare.")

So, Q offers Picard a one time only deal. He'll send Picard to his past, in his young body (although he still looks like Patrick Stewart to us—think *Quantum Leap*), just a day before the fight with the Nausicaans. If Picard can manage to avoid the fight this time around, he can keep his real heart, and, presumably, avoid the accident that's put him in mortal danger in the present. But if Picard fails, and the fight happens as it originally did, he'll be back where he started, where, presumably, he'll be dead for good. Which means an eternity spent getting lectured by Q, which, if not officially Hell, at least shares a zip code with the place.

Now, we all know that nearly all of television is about how the more things change, the more things stay the same. (For more statements of this type, I advise you to check out my best-selling book, *Zack Handlen Makes Vaguely Comprehensive Statements In A Desperate Attempt To Sound Clever and Insightful*. It will change your life, or at least the contents of your bank account.) There are exceptions, of course—TV is a big medium, and, apart from picture and sound, you'd be hard pressed to find any one theme that runs consistent through all of it. But generally speaking, shows work because they prevent you with a consistent world, and then spend their runs finding new ways to show basically the same world over and over and over again. Two of the best series ever produced for television, *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, cloaked that resistance to change in artful ways: on *The Sopranos*, one of the core ideas is that people *can* move on or better themselves, but that requires a tremendous amount of effort, and most of us would much rather cling to what we know, even if it's immoral or evil, just because it's easier; on *The Wire*, the system itself established patterns that would repeat again and again, despite the best efforts of those trapped inside of it. Arguably the best show on TV right now, *Breaking Bad*, is notable for its willingness to buck that trend, with a status quo that's constantly shifting to mirror the slow downfall of its leading man, but it's still the exception to the general rule.

TNG is no exception to this, and it's especially noticeable in Picard's case. Watching "Tapestry," it occurred to me that, as much as I love the rest of the cast, this show really does belong to Stewart. We know Picard better than any other member of the crew (with the possible exception of Data, who has less history to cover), and while the show does its best to tell stories around an ensemble, Picard-centric episodes tend to be the strongest. He's been assimilated and de-assimilated, spent a lifetime in another man's head, and had to endure the ravages of Wesley Crusher, but he's stayed roughly the same person through all of this. Sure, he may need a moment or two to collect himself after the latest calamity, but ("Family" aside) the remarkable amount of physical and psychic damage Picard has lived through has left hardly a mark on him. Because each week, Picard is back in the captain's chair, dispensing wisdom and phaser fire as needed. That's how TV works. Sometimes, this can be frustrating, and one of the ways

modern television took its first steps towards being recognized officially as legitimate art (as opposed to lowest-common-denominator pablum) was by allowing episodes to bleed into each other over the long term. But there's something comforting in the security of the familiar. In a more psychologically realistic show, Picard would suffer more visibly, but here, the nature of his character is defined by one of the unwritten requirements of the medium: through whatever happens, the captain remains steadfast.

It's no surprise, then, that the lesson Picard learns from Q and from trying to change the past is that he's always been the person he needed to be, and to change any part of that would be to change everything. When Jean-Luc rewrites history, he loses two friends: Cortland (Ned Vaughn), the guy who causes all the problems with the Nausicaans when they cheat him at a game of Dom-Jot; and Marta (J.C. Brandy). Corey is increasingly disgusted over Picard's attempts to mollify and turn the other cheek, finally walking off in disgust the day of the actual fight, after Picard shoves him aside to prevent a fight from breaking out. Things are a bit more complicated with Marta. Picard tells Q that he'd always regretted never making a move on her during their friendship, so this time around, when Marta seems impressed by the new-old Picard's sudden maturity, Jean-Luc goes for it, and the two sleep together. (Which leads to a great shot the next morning, with Picard naked in bed, waking up to find Q beside him.) Afterwards, though, things get weird, for no reason anyone can really put a finger on. It may be that Marta is just as unhappy as Cortland about Picard's behavior, or it may be that, since they're due to be shipped off to separate, er, ships soon, Marta just doesn't want to commit to a long distance relationship. Or maybe Picard is a terrible lover, who knows.

Regardless, changing his past enough to save himself a short-sword in the back costs Picard more than he was expecting, and the situation doesn't improve when Q jumps him forward in time, back to the "present." Here, Picard is still a crew-member on the *Enterprise*, but he's a minor officer running errands for Chief Engineer La Forge. As Q informs him, by avoiding conflict with the Nausicaans, Picard has changed the course of his life, and while he's no longer dying in Sick Bay because of an artificial heart, he's sacrificed his career, and, in a sense, his very self in order to save his life. Picard finds Riker and Troi in Ten Forward, and asks them some questions about how he's viewed on the ship, and whether it would be possible for him to apply for command. They're polite, but firm: Jean-Luc is a good man, and does his job, but he lacks the necessary spark, the boldness, to lead. Picard realizes his mistake—his past, for all the hardship and pain and embarrassment it may have caused him, is a part of who he is, and to pull even one thread loose from it would be to destroy the entire thing. He begs Q to return his life to what it was, so Q sends him back to the Nausicaan fight, where Picard gets stabbed once again, and laughing when it happens just as he did when he was younger. Then it's back to Sick Bay, where, still laughing, Picard doesn't die after all.

I could nitpick this episode. Q insists to Picard that what we're seeing is the actual past, instead of a construct, and if that's the case, I'm not sure just altering one fight would be enough to distort your entire personality. It's not as if the more cautious Picard relives his entire life; this is a *Quantum Leap* type scenario, so far as I can tell, so presumably the original rowdy young Picard would take over once the older Picard jumped to the future. There are ways around this, though, the easiest being that nothing that happens here is really "real" at all, that all of it is created by Q to teach Picard to accept that the man he was is responsible for the man he is, or else it's just Picard having a death-bed hallucination. (I think that last option is unlikely, but it's possible.) If this was all something Q had made up, that would also explain the coincidence of Picard still getting a position on the *Enterprise*, which is still staffed by the same people who ran it in the "real" timeline. That would mean Q had lied to Picard before, though, and while Q has had no problem lying in the past, it sounded like he was playing straight here.

Really, it doesn't matter that much, because this is a great episode regardless of whether it's time travel or fantasy or hallucination. There are plenty of nice touches here, like the fact that the Nausicaan fight Picard has so rued wasn't entirely his fault, or the way that everyone aboard the *Enterprise* where Picard isn't captain still seems perfectly happy and content. The former is a subtle way of indicating how memories change the past to fit the narrative we

want to see, in this case, that Picard viewed himself as rash and irresponsible; and the latter makes sure that Picard's choice in the end to risk dying and go back to his real life is entirely about him, and not driven by a need to protect or save anyone else. It's been a while since we've seen this aspect of Q, whose efforts here seem entirely designed to teach Picard a small lesson that won't really change his life much at all. (Really, have we ever seen this aspect of Q? The closest I can think of is when he taught the *Enterprise* a lesson in humility in "Q Who?," but that was motivated more out of spitefulness than any desire to help.) Because really, while we've seen Picard talking about his younger days with some shame over what he once was, it's not as if this is some sort of psychic torment that has dogged him his entire life. For all the time jumping and vague *A Christmas Carol*-ish feel, "Tapestry" is a modest episode, with a modest goal: to remind us that we are the sum of *all* our parts, even the ones we aren't very proud of. It's funny, really. Getting stabbed in the heart may have been the best thing that ever happened to Picard.

Stray Observations:

- There's actually an easy (if someone rude) way for Picard to find out if his near-death experience was real or not. When Q returns him to the past for the last time, it's right before the fight with the Nausicaans. Which means, if that really was time travel, Picard really did sleep with Marta. Unless she's dead, he could always call her and ask.
- "No. I am not dead. Because I refuse to believe that the Afterlife is run by you. The universe is not so badly designed."
- "He learned to play it safe, and never, ever get noticed by anyone."

Next week: We go back to our usual two episode schedule, as Worf hunts for his father and Data dreams in "Birthright, parts 1 and 2."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Birthright, Parts One And Two"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[7/28/11 10:00AM](#)

"Birthright, Part 1" (season 6, episode 16, first aired: 2/20/1993)

or *The One Where An Android Does Not Dream of Electric Sheep*

I'm not sure if it's a shift in the general culture, or just something unique to me, but I've never had any emotional investment in carrying on my father's legacy. I love my dad, and I would be the first to tell you he's a good man, and that he's accomplished a lot in his life to be proud of, but I don't feel any direct connection to those accomplishments. I'm ambitious, no question, and I certainly wouldn't object to either of my parents taking pride in what I do, but there's no sense that I need to achieve in order to do right by the family name. Stories about fathers nearly always revolve around a son needing to live up to his dad's expectations, or else transcend them. I've seen and read dozens of them, some good, many bad, and I've always wondered is this a theme that we repeat more because it's always been there, than because it means anything to any of us now. Maybe it's about maintaining fictional continuity, just as the son who strives to make sense of sire is trying to maintain a biological one.

Or maybe I'm just odd. Either way, the "I need to connect with my dead dad!" element of "Birthright: Part 1" didn't do a lot for me emotionally, but it's a sign how much I liked it (and it's follow-up) that this didn't really matter. As yet another two-part storyline in a season jammed full of them, "Part 1" seemingly makes the mistake that so many other part ones have made, with a plot that's heavily padded with unrelated material in order to justify the running time. But where before I've been frustrated by *TNG*'s inability to make the two-part structure work, here, that clumsiness actually made for a more interesting episode than I was expecting. What we've got here isn't *really* a "part 1," despite what it says in the title. "Birthright" is more a peek into the kind of show *TNG* might've been had it been able to more fully embrace serialization. I appreciate that peek, and for the interesting ideas raised here. I can see how they wouldn't work for everyone, but it worked for me.

Ostensibly, "Birthright" is about Worf. While the *Enterprise* is visiting Deep Space Nine (leaving time for Beverly and Picard to rave about the stations recreational facilities, while Geordi complains about the food), a Yridian information trader, Jaglom Shrek (James Cromwell, no stranger to *Trek*, although he isn't given much to do here), comes to Worf with an offer: he knows where Worf's father is. This enrages Worf, because as far as he knew, his father died during the attack on Khitomer, fighting the Romulans. If Worf's father is actually alive, a prisoner instead of a corpse, it will bring a shame down on the family that will reach all the way down to Alexander. Not that Alexander couldn't use a bit of shaming, just to keep him in line. So Worf threatens Jaglom, dismisses what he says as a lie, and we spend most of the rest of the episode waiting for Worf to have second thoughts. If he doesn't, it's not much of a story.

But then, an entire episode given over to Klingon doubt wouldn't be much of a story either, so while we're waiting for Worf to realize that he'd be better off having a living, shamed father, then a dead noble one, Dr. Bashir pops over from DS9 to muck about with a new toy, and Data has a dream. It's nice seeing Bashir (Alexander Siddig); as I mentioned in the comments section last week, the good doctor was a favorite character of mine when I watched *DS9* as a kid, and he's fun here. Once again, we have a terribly smart person being very interested in Data, although, as Data notes, Bashir is more interested in Data's ability to mimic humanity than he is in Data's computational skills. To Bashir, Data's hair growth and breathing is impressive, and also indicative of his creator's big goal. The android wasn't designed to be a magic robot super hero. He was designed to be alive, and that means something.

That's relevant to what happens next. Bashir is on the *Enterprise* to test out some mysterious space tech, and when Data and Geordi get involved, Data gets zapped by a bolt of energy from the machine. The energy knocks him offline, and in the thirty seconds he's out, he sees himself walking the halls of the ship, and meeting a young version of his creator, Dr. Soong (Spiner, without the make-up). The vision ends before Data can make any sense of it, but it haunts him, and while Worf is coming around to the idea of going on a dad hunt, Data is puzzling out how to handle the first seemingly irrational experience of his life. In the end, he does the logical thing, and recreates the initial experiment that caused him to pass out, with instructions to Geordi and Bashir to let him stay under for as long as he needs.

If you view "Part 1" as a typical first-half, it leaves something to be desired. While there's a nominal thematic connection between Worf's soul-searching about his dad, and Data's attempts to reconnect with his own father, the connection is never all that compelling, and the two storylines could easily have been relegated to different episodes. The only problem being that neither story has enough meat to it to stand on its own. Worf's arc, from learning that his dad may be alive, to rejecting this, to learning from his friends that he might have been too hasty, to going back to Jaglom, to setting out for the prison camp, isn't enough for a single episode. Nor is Data's arc. The drama for both characters is entirely internal, and there isn't much danger for either of them. (Sure, Worf decides to put himself in danger, but that doesn't happen till the second part.) Which makes it easier to dismiss this as padding, but I think it works.

The highlight here is Data's dreaming, and it's the dreaming that makes the padding easier to forgive. In order to get this story in this form, you need to have something else going on around it, and in most other cases, that would've meant some artificial conflict. At the very least, we would've had to create more artificial difficulties to keep Data from understanding what was going on before the final five minutes. That would've been a shame, because the strength of these scenes lies in their efficiency. If this *is* padding, it's a sort of padding that doesn't come across as belabored or pedantic. The dream sequences are nifty, and Data's attempts to paint them show a new side to his character. And for once, Spiner's work as Soong comes across as more inspiring than unsettling. Data's self-discovery in "Part 1" represents the purest form of *TNG*, exploration done for knowledge that leads to personal growth, and it's such a lovely, quiet thread that I'm willing to put up with some structural clunkiness if this is we get in trade.

Really, the biggest misstep in "Part 1" isn't something that becomes a clear mistake until the second half of Worf's story. When Worf arrives at the prison camp, he finds the situation not at all what he expected. He finds a Klingon elder, who tells him that Worf's father, Mogh, did die on Khitomer after all—and then the elder turns Worf over to the Romulan guards. Take Worf's father out of the story is a bad call, I think, but we can wait till part 2 for that. For now, let's just leave Data to his dreams, and Worf standing there with a confused expression on his face. He does those so well, don't you think?

Grade: B+

"Birthright: Part 2" (season 6, episode 17, first aired: 2/27/1993)

or *The One Where Worf Throws a Spear Through a Hoop*

And back in we go.

Here's my criticism: a large part of the first part of this two-parter is taken up by Worf trying to understand his relationship with his maybe-not-dead dad. Klingon culture dictates that warriors are supposed to die in battle, and being taken for a prisoner of war indicates a certain cowardice or weakness. Lord knows, Klingons aren't forgiving when it comes to cowardice and/or weakness, and Worf knows that if Mogh really did survive Khitomer, if he's spent the decades since the attack as a Romulan POW, it's not going to be good for the family name. Worf's family name has taken a number of hits over the course of the series, but those hits were always unjustified, part of a frame job that looked to turn Mogh into a traitor for political reasons. Here, the shame would be, at least by the dictates of Klingon culture, entirely deserved.

I've said before that I appreciate *TNG*'s attempts to treat Klingon laws and ritual with the same amount of respect the show gives other, easier to relate to cultures. *TNG*'s record isn't spotless, and it sometimes treats Worf as a headstrong child who needs to be taught to think before he stabs, but in general, the series has done a decent job of handling Worf's struggles to balance his Klingon side with his Federation duties. "Part 1" is no exception to this. While to you and I, Worf's fury at the very idea that his father might not be dead may seem ridiculous, the episode itself never acts as though Worf is behaving foolishly, instead allowing him to come to his own decision through conversations with friends about *their* relationships with his father. It's a nice bit of writing, and it's one of the reasons this storyline, at least theoretically, needed two eps to work. With only one episode, Worf would have to had to make the decision to rescue his dad almost instantaneously. I'm not sure any of us would've noticed (my knowledge of Klingon culture is, "shouting and stabbing and whatever Worf says"), but we would've lost some fine acting from Michael Dorn, and some good character work.

Which is why it's so frustrated that almost the first thing Worf learns upon arriving at the prison camp is that Mogh really did die at Khitomer after all. I'd thought when L'Kor told Worf his dad had died that L'Kor was lying; I thought there was even a chance that L'Kor *was* Worf's dad, and that the shame of his capture and imprisonment had led him to hide his true identity. I was wrong, though. Mogh is definitely dead, which means Worf spent "Part 1" doing all that soul-searching for nothing. Sure, the idea of Klingon values is an important one for "Part 2," and the scene where Worf talks about fathers with Data is strong enough that it doesn't need to be justified, but the writers here have chosen to take away the strongest emotional connection that their hero and the audience has to the situation, without any clear reason. The episode does a decent job finding conflicts without having to deal with any father/son unpleasantness, but why sacrifice the most interesting development without having anything to replace it with?

The twist here is that the Klingons who survived Khitomer to be taken captive by the Romulans are now by and large happy with how things ended up. Sure, they had their problems at first—and they certainly didn't want to be

captured, but when the Romulans knocked them unconscious during battle, they didn't have much choice. But now, everyone is getting along very well, enough for a whole new generation of Klingons to have been raised in the confines of the camp. Even more, there's been some inter-species hooking up. Tokath, the Romulan in charge of the camp for the start, chose to keep the place going after the war, and he's now married to a Klingon; they've even produced a beautiful half-Klingon/half-Romulan daughter named Ba'el. It's a relationship that wouldn't work in the outside world, just as the peace between the Klingons and their former guards wouldn't work. It's an Eden for people who've only known bloodshed, and then Worf has to arrive and screw up everything.

The problem with "Part 2" is that it's soft; despite the increasing tension between Worf and the elders, despite the fact that Tokath nearly has Worf executed at the end of the episode, the tension isn't particularly strong. There doesn't always need to be tension, of course, but given the volatile nature of the situation, everything that happens here happens too easily, and to much by rote. The elders resist Worf and refuse to let him leave, so he starts behaving like a Klingon in front of the younger people, and they soon grow infatuated with the ways of their culture which have been denied them. This comes to a head, Tokath tries to remove Worf from the equation, but it's too late, and Worf finally leaves the planet with the young people who are curious to see more of the universe. (Barring, presumably, Ba'el, whose mixed-species parentage would probably cause some problems.)

There's no real sacrifice here by any party, and, apart from realizing he's maybe a little racist towards Romulans, Worf doesn't learn much of anything about himself, or open his mind. I appreciate the way "Part 2" presents us with a conflict that has no clear answer: the peace that Tokath and the others have achieved is laudable and worth preserving, but Worf's attempts to bring culture and self-awareness to his own kind are also important. It's also fun to have the ostensible hero of the episode be the nearest thing there is to a threat. Worf is a disruption here, not the others, and if he'd never come to this colony, there may never have been any strife. The episode asks just how much our heritage and social identity is worth, and it does its best to show both sides of the idea without giving any easy answers.

It just doesn't hold together, though. I'm not sure that the lessons Worf teaches really are that worthwhile, and the fact that all we get to see is the Klingon side of this, when it's a Klingon/Romulan camp, makes it less interesting to me. I suppose there's some point being made here about the way the older generation always resists young people coming into their own, and how forcing people to make one choice isn't right, even if that choice is better for them in the long run, but it's too tepid to have much impact. It's especially disappointing how easy that final resolution comes—Worf makes everyone leaving with him swear never to reveal where they truly came from. That's it? If that's all that was needed, they should've just done that at the start. (I realize it's more complicated than that, but the end here is too much of a wish fulfillment for Worf. Apart from one awkward last look, we don't even get an acknowledgement that Ba'el won't be able to leave with the others, and that even if he loves her, Worf will have to leave her.)

Despite all my assertions otherwise at the start of this review, I seem to have once again come around to a two-part episode in which the first half is stronger than the second. But really, these episodes are so distinct that I don't think the failing of "Part 2" is the usual failing we see with two-parters. It's not that "Part 1" raised the bar so high that the conclusion couldn't hope to live up to expectations. As cliffhangers go, Worf-at-phaserpoint isn't going to blow anyone's mind. It's more that the second half failed to deal with the ideas it raised in a satisfying way. I appreciate the ambition and thought that clearly went into both these episodes, but while I found much of "Part 2" interesting and fun to watch, I was never gripped by it. "Part 1" brought me something new, with Data's strange visions and the ghosts of dead fathers. "Part 2" is a little too much of a classic *TOS* plot, without the camp: first thing we do is find an Eden, the next thing we do is destroy it.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- I didn't mention the quick scenes on the *Enterprise* in "Part 2," but there are quick scenes on the *Enterprise* in "Part 2." They're largely irrelevant.
- Morn puts in an appearance in the background of "Part 1." Or, as he'd put it, ...
- Troi is absent from "Part 2," but she does help Worf make up his mind in "Part 1," and even gets the episode's funniest line: "Did the table do something wrong?"
- When Worf tells Picard that the Klingons he brings aboard from a downed ship, and that there were no survivors from Khitomer, Picard says, "I understand." I wonder if he does—something about the look on his face suggests he might have a good guess or two.

Next week: We find out who the *Enterprise* really belongs to in "Starship Mine," and learn some "Lessons."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "Starship Mine"/"Lessons"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)
[8/04/11 10:00AM](#)

"Starship Mine" (season 6, episode 18, first aired: 3/27/1993)

Or The One Where Picard Does Not Ride A Horse

This is an odd fit for *TNG*: an action movie plotline that has Picard running around a nearly abandoned *Enterprise*, taking out bad guys with crossbows and booby traps. *Die Hard* on a space-ship, as it were. There's also a sub-plot with the rest of the crew stuck on the planet, standard hostage-situation set-dressing, largely created in order to believably isolate Picard for most of the hour. This is a story that, with some retooling, wouldn't seem out of place on an episode of *MacGyver* (especially the booby traps), and it's a definite change of pace for this series, which usually strives to be more thoughtful and measured in its storytelling. But then, season 6 has been an odd season from the start. That's not a negative, at least not completely. Both "Chain of Command" and "Tapestry" come from writers and producers willing to push the edges, to excellent result, and "Starship Mine," while not at the same level of those episodes, is a lot of fun.

The more I think about it, the more "Mine" really does play like an '80s action drama. We have thieving bad guys, each of whom gets a comeuppance that leaves our captain guilt-free; a comedy relief commanding officer down on the planet, so irritating that our heroes go to great lengths to avoid him; Riker getting in a fist-fight; and, most enjoyably, Picard's transformation into a bad-ass, capable of nearly taking out an entire crew of villains single-handedly. Of course, none of these story elements on their own is that distinctive. *TNG* has had its share of villains and annoying Starfleet personnel. Riker has punched and been punched before, and periodically, the show goes out of its way to try and shed those troublesome accusations that Picard is a thinker, where Kirk was a doer. (This was always bullshit, by the way. Kirk did his fair share of thinking, and Picard is decisive when he needs to be.) It's just the way everything combines together that gives "Mine" its special feel. For once, we're not interested in

complicated political relationships, strange alien species or trippy high concept. We're here to tell a simple tale that's been told dozens of times before, for better or worse.

What I love about stories like this is that they are, in a way, puzzles, but for the writer, not the audience. In order to make everything work, you need to find a way that gets Picard alone on the ship for the duration. This means not just emptying the *Enterprise* of its crew, but also arranging a plausible reason for Picard to return, as well as some way to stop him from making contact with the rest of the ensemble when trouble strikes, and stopping that ensemble from rushing to his aid when they notice he's missing. At least part of the success of the episode depends on how contrived all of this design becomes. If it's too elaborate, the audience will notice the strings and the tension becomes laughable. If it's not airtight enough, there's no tension to laugh at, because the danger is never all that pressing. *Die Hard* is a classic of the genre because it brings all the pieces into play so deftly that you're only ever really asked to believe one hugely implausible thing (the coincidence of Rickman and his gang taking over the Nakatomi building the same night that Bruce Willis happens to be visiting his wife; the advent of the holiday makes this slightly less random, but it's still a pretty big leap). The rest just falls into place naturally from there.

Going by that standard, "Mine" does a decent job. The *Enterprise* is brought in for a scan designed to eliminate accumulated baryon particles. I'm not sure we've ever heard of this problem before, but the idea of the ship needing periodic repairs/work done, considering how much time it spends in the outer reaches of space, isn't a bad one. The scan is lethal, so that means the entire ship needs to be evacuated before the scan starts. The episode opens with the evacuation already well under way, and the hectic, "I hope I don't forget to turn the oven off" vibe gets things off to an excellent start. We learn that the senior members of the crew have been invited to attend a reception for them on Arkaria Base, run by Commander Hutchinson. Hutchinson, it turns out, is something of a bore. We get hints of this when Data tries out a new small talk sub-routine on Picard, who tells him he should try and learn from Hutchinson during the reception. We then get confirmation of the commanders dullness when Worf manages to excuse himself from the reception (thus removing him from the conflict to come).

This serves as set-up for some passable comic relief (Data takes Picard's instruction to learn from Hutchinson *very* seriously), but it also gives Picard extra motivation to leave the reception and go back to the *Enterprise*. Hutchinson mentions that they have horses and areas for riding by the base, and Picard seizes on this, deciding he wants to do a little horse-backin', and that needs to return to the ship to get his saddle. Which leads to a running joke, as people keep repeating some variation on "Every experienced rider has their own saddle." It's more than a little corny, but really, that's part of the '80s action drama homage—you can't get through an hour of *The A-Team* without suffering a fair share of awful gags. Besides, it gets Picard where he needs to be, and the sight of him lugging a saddle around the ship's corridors is amusing, in its way.

Really, this isn't a perfect solution; I'm sure there were other saddles on the base, and the fact that there are only minutes before the scan starts makes it foolhardy of Picard to take such a risk for no real pressing reason. But it works enough in context, and I guess it's a sign of how mundane the baryon scan really is, if Picard takes the danger this lightly. Once he's on the *Enterprise*, he runs into trouble when he's accosted by one of the technicians supposedly prepping the ship for the scan. (Tim Russ plays the technician; he's best known these days as Tuvok from *Voyager*.) The conversation is tense for no apparent reason, and Picard quickly realizes something is wrong. He and the techie fight, Picard wins; while back on the base, Geordi gets a glimpse of something he shouldn't have. This prompts station personnel to shoot Hutchinson and Geordi, and take Beverly, Troi, Riker and Data hostage. And after that, it's pretty much on.

The majority of "Mine" follows Picard's attempts to first understand the situation, and then get control of it. On the base, Riker and the others are able to work out a plan fairly quickly—they use Geordi's VISOR to send out a super-sonic pulse that knocks everybody unconscious, except, of course, for Data. But back on the *Enterprise*, life isn't so

easy. The episode really doesn't have enough plot to sustain the full hour, largely because we never really get to know much about the bad guys, beyond the fact that the head bad guy—or bad gal—Kelsey is on the ship to steal a waste byproduct of the engines, trilitium resin, which is very dangerous, and very valuable. She intends to sell the resin, which makes her the worst kind of *TNG* villain: someone whose only doing what they do for money. And she's especially evil, because she's willing to kill her own people to get what she wants. Beyond that, though, there's not much there, which means the byplay between her and Picard is never that compelling. *Die Hard* (which also featured thieves who are initially mistaken for terrorists) got a lot of mileage out of the cat-and-mouse game between its protagonist and antagonist, helped in no small part because Alan Rickman is such a fun, interesting performer. Kelsey is just one note, and the team around her is barely that.

This means that instead of trying to establish relationships, "Mine" has to fill the time with Picard first beating the enemy, then getting trapped by the enemy, then beating the enemy and getting trapped by them again. It's tedious dynamic, although thankfully, it all happens so fast that the tedium never really gets a chance to set in. Besides, Picard is never captive very long, and his resourcefulness—running to Worf's quarters to get a crossbow after the power is shut down (in a way that renders all phasers inoperative, which is another piece in the puzzle), setting up booby traps in the one spot of the ship he knows Kelsey will have to go—is plausible and fun. The episode keeps at a brisk pace throughout, moving fast enough that its problems never really stick around long enough to register. It's not profound, but it's certainly inoffensive.

My other big criticism here is the increasingly convoluted way the story works to bump off members of Kelsey's team (including, ultimately, Kelsey herself) in a way that absolves Picard of any blame. The baryon scan serves as a convenient executioner, and characters have a weird habit of stumbling into it, despite Picard's best efforts to save them. The only death he's directly responsible for is Kelsey's. Well, Kelsey and whoever's on the ship she uses to escape. Picard removes the stabilizer from the equipment she's using to carry the resin, and it explodes, although thankfully, it waits until Kelsey's ship is sufficiently far from the *Enterprise* before doing so. It's all a weird, kind of silly method to keep Picard, who obviously values life, from going full Kirk. That wouldn't have suited *TNG* at all, and really, "Mine" isn't a wheelhouse the series should be visiting on a regular basis. The episode serves as a fun diversion, and that's enough.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- The more I think about it, the more obvious the *Die Hard* parallels become. Picard even pretends to be someone else for a while (the barber, of all people).
- I can't decide what to make of Data's brief subplot. It's not painful, at least.
- Troi Watch: she senses that the hostage takers are uneasy, which means they're rushing their time-table. Which is moderately helpful to know. (Although she's back in that no-shoulder uniform, which looks even more ridiculous now that we've seen her wearing a regular uniform.)
- The bad guys on the base who hold Riker and the others hostage are either deaf or terrible at their jobs. And they certainly aren't deaf, because otherwise the VISOR trick wouldn't have worked.

"Lessons" (season 6, episode 19, first aired: 4/3/1993)

Or The One Where Picard Plays With Someone Else

Here's an episode which, while a bit unusual for the show in some respects, seems a much better fit for *TNG*. It's thoughtful, open-minded, and more concerned with character than action. It's a little on the slow side, to be sure (I spent the first twenty minutes waiting for the plot to kick in), and hampered to a certain extent by the closed-off

nature of *TNG*'s storytelling. But on the whole it works, focusing once again on Picard's role on the ship, in this case how his job as captain makes it difficult for him to form personal relationships with the crew. Really, any episode that focuses on Picard is starting on a good foot. The rest of the cast has come a long way, and they've all had their chance to shine (well, apart from Troi, but "Face of the Enemy" wasn't *that* bad), but Patrick Stewart still owns this series, and he's the only one I can think of that could've pulled this off.

The biggest difficulty in getting into "Lessons" is that at least half of the episode is taken up by Picard's growing fondness for a new crew-member. *TNG* has done its best with romance before, but generally those romances are set up against some kind of conflict or drama, and the affair is much more overtly passionate. (Well, by *TNG* standards, at least.) The courtship between Picard and Lt. Cmdr. Nella Daren (Wendy Hughes) is low-key by comparison to, say, Troi's emotional messiness or Geordi's fumbling. It's easy enough to guess where things are headed when Picard first meets her in the cold open; she and her astrophysics team are using a considerable amount of ship energy for their experiments, and when Picard stops by to see what's going on, he interrupts their work, which frustrates Daren to no end. She quickly realizes he's the captain, and gets him some tea from the replicator as a peace offering, but instead of getting him his customary Earl Grey, she offers a mixture of her own creation. Picard doesn't much like it, but he gets this certain look in his eye, and you know this isn't the last we've seen of Daren.

Well, of course it isn't the last we've seen of her. Regardless of Picard's expression, this is a TV show, and it doesn't have the time to randomly introduce characters who only appear in one scene, to no great purpose. But there are plenty of other reasons Daren could've come back, and it's a measure of how slow "Lessons" takes things that I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. Obviously Daren is going to be important, and odds were, Picard was attracted to her, and she to him, and that was going to lead to something. But there's nothing else in the episode beyond that relationship, and it's sometimes hard to tell just how close they've become at various points in the story. Picard starts exhibiting all the signs of new love—he keeps talking about Daren to everyone, including Beverly, which makes for an awkward scene—but it doesn't get serious until the two start playing music together. Picard shows her the flute he got in "Inner Light," and, in one of the ep's best moments, Daren takes him to a spot in the bowels of the *Enterprise* she marks as the most acoustically perfect place in the whole ship. There, the two duet, her on keyboard, him on flute, and the music filters out through the ship to where Geordi can hear it. But eventually they stop playing, and start kissing, and that's when things get complicated.

Here's where the plot really kicks in—actually, wait, not quite yet. First, we get a scene of Picard asking Troi if it would cool if he and Daren hooked up (Troi is, unsurprisingly, fine with this). Then, as their relationship goes public, things get awkward; Daren breaks protocol on a question of personnel, and Riker feels as though her actions have put in him a difficult spot. He talks to Picard, and Picard assures him that he trusts Riker's judgment in the issue, but the (mild) damage has already been done. It's not exactly the most thrilling sequence, but it does fit in with one of *TNG*'s recurring themes: the way it's possible even for good people with the best intentions to run into difficulties while working together.

The action finally kicks in when the *Enterprise* gets a distress call from Bersallis Three. Approaching fire storms have put the colony there at risk, and the *Enterprise* has to evacuate everyone before the storms arrive and lay waste to the area. Daren has had some experience dealing with fire storms in the past, and she proposes a method of holding the storms back temporarily to allow time for the colonists to escape. Given her experience, Picard has to assign her to the team installing the shields that will keep off the storms, and he's not super happy about it. This is dangerous work, and it only gets worse when Daren realizes that she and her team will have to make adjustments to the shields by hand, while the storm rages around them. As the batches of colonists beam up to the ship, Picard hears reports of the situation on the planet worsening by the moment, until finally, he gets word that everyone has left—except for two teams working on the shields. And, even worse, Daren was on one of the missing teams.

To give "Lessons" credit, I wasn't sure if Daren had been killed. It would've been a lame choice if she had, admittedly. As I mentioned above, the show's general lack of serialization means it's unlikely that Picard would get a love interest who'd stick around for long, especially one we've never seen before. In order for "Lessons" to fit in with the rest of the series, then, the episode has to come up with some plausible reason for the two characters, who seem very much in love, to part before the end credits. Death is one way around this, but it's such an obvious, hokey trick that it would've seriously undercut the episode's gentle, contemplative tone. That I still thought they *might* go in that direction is less a flaw in the ep, and more the handling of those tense moments when Picard believes Daren has died. His shock here, and grief, are short-lived, but they need to be believable enough to convince us we're not watching filler, and painful enough to justify Picard's decision to end the relationship.

Daren is alive, after all, the last person to be beamed up from the planet, carrying someone and looking significantly worse for wear. After Beverly treats her and the crisis has concluded, she and Picard meet privately to discuss what happened, and while nothing that happens here is exactly a surprise, it's handled so well that it doesn't need to be shocking. After coming so close to losing Daren, Picard has realized he can't ever order her into life-threatening danger again, and Daren knows it. Which means either one of them has to quit their job, or else they need to call it quits. Picard suggests trying to manage a long-distance relationship, but they both understand how unlikely that would be. All of this was basically inevitable from the moment the two first met, which could've made it less interesting to watch; as well, the sudden appearance of a danger which Daren is uniquely suited to deal with is a little too convenient for the narrative, especially coming so early in their relationship. "Lessons" generally works, though, because of its low-key approach. That approach can be rough, and I still think the first half of the episode plays things too bloodlessly—it takes a certain amount of patience to get through to the meat of the story. But there are some beautiful scenes, and there's something to be said for allowing drama to develop on its own.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- The "Inner Light" call-back is well-handled. I wasn't hugely sold on Daren, but when Picard makes a special point of explaining the flute's significance to her, it helps solidify the connection between them.

Next week: The *Enterprise* takes part in "The Chase," and Riker has something of an identity crisis in "Frame of Mind."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: "The Chase"/"Frame Of Mind"](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[8/11/11 10:00AM](#)

"The Chase" (first aired 4/24/1993)

Or The One Where "Peace On Earth" Is All It Says

I went to college because my parents wanted me to go to college, and because that's just what people my age were doing—there was no question about it, not once. The only real issue was what I planned to major in, but even that wasn't too mysterious. I was going to be a writer, I knew that, but to support myself before the writing career took off, my parents suggested I get a Bachelors in English Literature, with an eye towards teaching someday. Again, I did this because I'd heard others had done it. Stephen King was a teacher for a while, and really, what else was I going to do? But less than a semester away at school, I started having doubts. I was taking English classes regularly, and enjoying them well enough, but college drama was my real home, the only place where I could create anything approaching a social life. When I declared my first major, I threw caution to the wind and went with Theater. For the next few years, right up until I graduated, I thought I might try and make a go of it as an actor. I took English as a second major, but being a performer was more immediately exciting. Hell, I didn't even really need a degree. I could just move to Chicago and start scrounging for gigs.

Ten years later (oh dear god), and I never tried to make it as an actor. I never tried to make it as a teacher, either, but to be honest, that was never much of a dream. I don't think I could've survived the stress of living job to job like struggling actors (if they're lucky) do, and I believe the choice I ended up making—to wander through the next seven or so years, over-medicated and uninspired, until I finally got my shit together—was the only choice I could've made. (Remember what I said before about regrets? Wait, why the hell *would* you remember. Are you taking notes?) That doesn't mean I don't miss performing, and that I don't sometimes wonder what might've happened if I'd taken the risk. Most lives have moments like that. If you're lucky, wondering what might have been

won't be incredibly depressing. And if you're *really* lucky, you'll get a glimpse of what was down the road untaken, like Picard does in "The Chase."

That title sounds exciting, doesn't it? And this episode does have its exciting moments, but the actual "chase" part of it doesn't really become relevant till about halfway through. The first part of the ep deals with a visit from an old friend. Professor Galen, a mentor of Picard's from his academy days, visits the *Enterprise* with a special gift for his old student: an artifact made by the Master of Tarquin Hill, who is, in fact, completely irrelevant to this story. In fact, apart from providing a valuable clue and giving Picard a visual representation of his internal confusion, the artifact isn't important at all. What is important is that Galen wants to remind Picard of his passion for archaeology, so that Picard will agree to accompany him on a search for what may be the most important the discovery in the history of recorded civilization.

As for what that discovery actually is, well, Galen refuses to explain himself, and when Picard politely but firmly refuses the offer, explaining that as much as he'd like to go adventuring, the *Enterprise* isn't just some hobby he can drop when a another opportunity comes along, Galen becomes unreasonable. Really unreasonable, actually; the professor acts like a spoiled child, accusing Picard of making a mistake by choosing captaincy over a more scholarly pursuit, and resenting that Jean-Luc doesn't see things his way. It might be easier to understand Galen's anger here if he got into specifics, but he refuses to say what exactly he's looking for, only that it's incredibly important, huge even, and jeez, just get on the shuttlecraft, will you? He also doesn't mention that whatever he's looking for, he's not the only one looking for it, although it's possible he just doesn't realize this. Galen does not strike me as a man built for intrigue.

Maybe Galen doesn't tell Picard what's really going on because of ego—Hey, I'm amazing enough that my former student should agree to do what I say without justification, and if he doesn't, he doesn't get to play. Or maybe it's because he secretly fears that if Picard really knew what was going on, Picard would seize control of the mission in the name of the Federation. (Although Galen does how much easier it would be to do his work if he had a starship at his disposal, which sounds more like someone who wouldn't mind some help.) Whatever the reasoning behind the professor's recalcitrance, it ends up effectively getting him killed. After he leaves the *Enterprise*, a Yridian destroyer waylays his shuttle, holding the ship in a tractor beam and boarding it. When the *Enterprise* attempts a rescue, the Yridian ship is destroyed by a single hit (which confuses Worf to no end), and the professor is already doomed. Picard has him beamed to Sick Bay, but Beverly can't do anything for him. Galen mutters, "I was too hard on you," to Picard, and then he dies.

Which is how Picard finally gets drawn into the real meat of the story. "Chase" has a lot of fun showing our heroes first finding a series of number blocks on Galen's computer drives, and then trying to figure out what those blocks mean. They visit two of the planets Galen had already visited in his travels, and neither planet has any intelligent life on it. One planet is rendered completely barren of life while the *Enterprise* is in orbit around it, so clearly *something* is going on here. Eventually, Picard and the others figure it out: Galen was on a quest to find the missing entries in a series of DNA fragments which seem to comprise a kind of genetic computer program. To this end, he'd farmed DNA samples from each of the worlds he'd visited to finish the program (we never hear how the professor stumbled across this idea, or how he figured out which planets would have the code he needed). The *Enterprise* rushes to the Kurl system, where Galen purchased the relic he gave Picard at the start of the episode. There, they find Cardassians, who are also interested in the professor's work. And then the Klingons show up.

It's at this point that "Chase" goes from intriguing sci-fi/character study about regret to a kind of wacky espionage thriller, as Picard negotiates a brief peace between the three groups in exchange for information, only to be betrayed by the Cardassians almost immediately. The tonal shift is entertaining, and it gives more of a sense of urgency to the quest, but both the Cardassians and the Klingons are broadly drawn, turning the episode into another in the show's

long history of "Man, humans are so much better than all these crazy, greedy aliens, huh?" stories. Instead of spending time with Picard as he deals with his need to satisfy Galen's legacy as well as salve his guilt over what happened to his mentor, we get silly villains being silly. There's even a scene when the Klingon captain (who, to the episode's credit, actually turns out to be the most honorable of the bunch of thieves) screws around with Data, for no plot purpose whatsoever. It's a funny scene, and I don't need every moment in an episode to advance the storyline, but it cuts down on any attempt at tension when we get five minutes of pure comic relief in the last act.

There are plenty of good ideas here. The secret behind Galen's search is a great concept, and the way everyone teams up together to find a solution manages to make use of most of the cast. (I especially like how excited Beverly is about everything. I never thought of this before, but Dr. Crusher is as into the geekier, more technical aspects of her work as Geordi is into his own. There's something to be said for having a positive female character who's super into science, without anyone needing to make a big deal out of it.) I'm not sure we're given enough of a reason to justify why other races are involved in the hunt. I get it, everybody thinks the program, once finished, will yield up some great treasure, but the way their expectations fit so neatly with what we know about them (the Cardassians think it'll be unlimited power, the Klingons think it will be a weapon) is uninteresting, and we never really know how they found out about Galen's research in the first place. I'm sure he wasn't subtle in his work, but given how reluctant he was to tell Picard anything, I'd be curious to learn how, say, Gull O'Ceat found out. There's something cartoonish about all of this, from the Klingon's posturing to the inevitable Cardassian betrayal to the arrival of the Romulans in the end game—it's like one of the sillier episodes of *TOS*. Or, hell, an actual cartoon, some well-made and well-intentioned but ultimately shallow kid's show meant to demonstrate the hollowness of greed.

That's especially true of the conclusion of the chase. (Said chase, by the way, only really takes up about five minutes of screen-time. You could argue that the hunt had been on-going long before the *Enterprise* got involved, but it only really feels like a race to a shared goal near the end of the episode.) Everybody gets together on the last planet, Worf and his new buddy confront the treacherous Klingons, and then the Romulans show up, because they've been tracking the *Enterprise* ever since the Yridian ship exploded. While the rest of them argue, Picard and Beverly manage to get the last DNA sample. They finish the program, which reconfigures Picard's tricorder and delivers a message in the form of a hologram of a species that have been dead for billions of years. The alien doesn't offer weapons or power or anything concrete, beyond the knowledge that she and her kind manipulated primitive DNA so that the races of intelligent life in this universe would share her kind's shape—what we call humanoid. She reminds the group that they are all related somehow, hopes that they don't mind serving as a monument to her race, and disappears.

This is corny as hell. The idea that an ancient race engineered a coherent blueprint for sentient beings that would, many years later, make life easy on decades of make-up and costume artists, is ridiculous enough to be cool, sure. But "The real treasure is love!" is never a satisfying answer to this kind of mystery, and it comes with a sort of guilt-inducing moral superiority that makes it hard to take seriously. "Oooo, so you were expecting something concrete? Oh, you stupid minds! So childish and full of greed. We don't have toys to offer you—just the joy of our empty handed embrace!" Something like that. I'm sure the first time this trick got pulled, it was effectively clever enough to work, but now, it just smacks of laziness. At least "One Tin Soldier" had the decency to make it all rhyme.

With that in mind, though, this ending isn't *that* bad. It fits in with the overly broad goofiness of the episode's latter half, and just because something is corny doesn't mean it's terrible. And it fits in with *TNG*'s utopian ideals, of a galaxy of life-forms slowly, tortuously coming together, despite their myriad differences. "The Chase" has a certain endearing optimism in its conclusion, right up to a scene when a Romulan commander makes it a point of saying farewell to Picard, hinting that maybe, at some future point, their two warring cultures might eventually find peace. This, to me, is *Trek* all over—idealistic to a fault, and more than a little naive, but so committed to its idealism that it can almost make you believe it's true. Or else should be.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- We never do find out what happened to those poor Yridians.
- The aliens who left the DNA program should've hooked up with the ones who sent out the probe that got Picard in "The Inner Light." That would've been something.
- It's a small point, but the fact that Picard never seriously considers going with Galen is one of the episode's smarter choices. He's upset at rejecting his mentor (for a second time), and he's guilt-ridden when Galen dies, but there's never any question that he might quit his job. As, of course, there wouldn't be.

"Frame of Mind" (first aired 5/1/1993)

Or The One Where Riker Takes a Tour of the Cabinet of Dr. Caligari

I usually avoid reading plot teasers for episodes before I review them. As I've mentioned, I'd seen a fair number of *TNG* episodes before starting this project, but it'd been years since I watched the show regularly, and there were plenty of episodes I'd never even heard of. So I decided, like I did with *TOS* (and like I'll be doing with *Deep Space Nine*, which I've seen even less of than *TOS* and *TNG*), to go as blind as possible. If I stumbled across spoilers in comments, so be it, but I wouldn't seek them out, and I'd even avert my eyes from the few short sentences Netflix (or the IMDB) provided to describe individual eps. It's worked out well so far. This week, though, I did get a piece of what "Frame of Mind" was about before I sat down to watch it. The name was familiar to me, and while I'd never seen it before, I had vague memories of Riker acting crazy. The plot teaser read, in effect, "Riker finds himself in a mental institution, where he's told that his life on the *Enterprise* was a delusion. Now he has to figure out what's real, and what isn't it."

This sounded cool—it's like that *Buffy* episode from the sixth season, "Normal Again," only without any of the meta-commentary. But while that is a fairly accurate description of what happens in "Frame," it suggests a level of conventionality that the episode doesn't possess. For once, going in with expectations worked to my advantage, because it meant I was completely fooled by the cold open. Riker is talking to someone off-screen (someone who sounds a lot like Data, but that could mean anything). He's out of uniform and clearly agitated, arguing about his innocence, and his sanity. The off-screen presence suggests Riker has committed some horrible crime, but Riker denies this. So, I'm thinking, we're doing an in media res opening, and Riker is already in the asylum. The back story of how he got there will just come out in the dialog.

Then the camera pulls back, and we realize that Riker is actually rehearsing a scene from a play, with Data as his co-star. Beverly's directing, but she's not entirely convinced by Riker's performance. The play's called "Frame of Mind." From that moment on, the episode had me. It's a simple twist, and you could even argue it's just as familiar as my original concept. These days, it seems like people are constantly putting fictions inside of fictions inside of fictions, metarduckens designed to make your brain explode instead of your heart. Maybe it's just getting caught off guard (by a show that doesn't surprise me that often at this point) because I made the wrong assumption that sold me. But really, this isn't a game *TNG* plays very often, and, as the rest of "Frame" ably demonstrates, that's a shame. Even if depicting mental anguish isn't really what the show is about, they do a damn good job of it.

The episode kept catching me off guard even after the cold open, not because the plot is so hugely different from anything we've seen before (it reminds me a bit of "Schisms," the episode where Riker and other crewmembers kept losing time to alien abductors), but because of the way that plot is presented. "Mind" gets by with minimal hand-holding, something I've expressed my admiration for many times before. We're given clues, but nothing in the episode telegraphs what's happening, and there's no explicit, hard truths until the very end. The audience should

have some basic ideas by the midpoint; we know that Riker isn't really crazy, that the alien race that has him locked up is playing some kind of dirty pool, and that in order to escape, he'll have to find some way to break their spell. But the script never confirms these assumptions until it has to. More, it goes out of its way to seemingly contradict them, getting a great deal of suspense out of both Riker's plight, and the curiosity over how that plight could possibly be resolved.

Riker's working on the play, running lines and pushing himself before the performance. Picard tells him about an upcoming mission on Tilonus 4. The planet has fallen into civil war, and both sides are desperate for an edge in weapons and technology, which makes the Federation team stationed on the planet a perfect target for kidnapping and torture. The team has gone into hiding, and it'll be Riker's job to go undercover and contact them for extraction. This is a standard expository scene; we've had dozens of them on the series before. It sets up what will most likely serve as the main conflict of the episode. Since I'd heard that Riker was going to be held in some kind of asylum, it seemed logical to assume that the Tilonians would capture him while he was on the planet, then attempt to break his mind for interrogation by drugging him and convincing him that his past was a hallucination he needed to exorcise.

That's fine, but there was something clunky about wasting a whole scene with Picard for this information, especially when this was followed by a scene with Worf instructing Riker on the proper way to blend in on Tilonus. It's not a terrible sequence, but we've had Riker go on missions before, and by this point in the show, starting with a briefing is just too predictable and flat a way to introduce the plot. There's no momentum here, and by telling Riker what he needs to accomplish, we now know what to expect. We know what we'll need to get through before the *real* episode starts, which is a bummer.

Except it's not that simple; in fact, it's not clunky at all. There's a new crewmember Riker keeps seeing around the ship who strikes him as... off, somehow. And then, while Worf is demonstrating the proper use of a Tilonian ceremonial dagger, he accidentally cuts Riker's forehead. It's not like Worf to be so clumsy, and it's not like the show (or any show) to have a moment like this for no good reason. Riker goes to see Beverly to have his wound healed, and on the way out of Sick Bay, catches a glimpse of a burn victim. This upsets him so terribly he goes to Troi for answers; all she can tell him is, maybe he's given himself over completely to his role in the play. And that's a good thing, right? Acting is all about going a little mad. In fact, Riker has given himself so completely that at the performance that evening, he wows the crowd to a standing ovation. And then the crowd disappears, and Riker finds himself in a real cell that looks a lot like the stage set, only less fake. There's a calm doctor there to tell him that everything will be all right, and to remind him that there's no such thing as William T. Riker of Starfleet. They called the Federation. No record of such a person exists.

The rest of the episode keeps working to throw you off guard, by never letting the status quo settle between the *Enterprise* or the Tilonian asylum. We know the things the doctor tells Riker can't actually be the truth, which means there's more to the asylum than meets the eye. But what does that mean when Riker finds himself back on the *Enterprise* after a lengthy sojourn in Ward 47? It's not just some dream he's having, and we can be reasonably sure the character isn't going insane. (This is because in fiction, given the choice between strange phenomena and insanity, the smart money is always on the former. Not so true in real life.) By repeatedly switching back and forth between both places, "Mind" makes it difficult to pick up the thread of exactly what's going on—and where in some episodes that could be pointlessly frustrating, here it simply serves to put us even more firmly on Riker's side.

Which makes it even more interesting when Riker surrenders to the Tilonian version of events as quickly as he does. Usually in this sort of story, you'd expect the hero to firmly resist all attempts to break his mind, and for his determination to eventually win through in the end. Riker does finally beat his captors, but before that happens, he capitulates to the doctor's assertion that everything about the *Enterprise* is fake. He doesn't look weak in doing so, and it makes for another fun shift in expectations (as well as fitting in, in a subtle way, with Picard's behavior in

"Chain of Command"; even heroes can be dismantled). It also, probably unintentionally, draws out the central conflict in his delusion. Since the *Enterprise* is real, by going along with the delusion, Riker forces his mind to try and sustain an unsustainable premise. And on top of all that, it feels honest. We like to pretend that we have strong, unbreakable ties to our version of reality, that only a crazy person could mistake delusion for the real world. But really, none of us is as solid as we pretend to be. Our concepts of existence are just aggregates of experience, a rough average of all the moments we've lived through, and the only reason each new moment feels as solid as the last is that we're never offered any choice in the matter.

Riker finally comes to his senses, and it turns out neither the *Enterprise* nor the asylum are actually real, at least not his recent experiences in them. The Tilonian who, in Riker's hallucination, had served as the head of the hospital (as well as appearing regularly on the *Enterprise* as a lieutenant), is actually attempting to drain information from Riker's brain, and the delusions he's been experiencing are his mind's way of coping with the process. Riker gains consciousness long enough to get rid of the plug in his temple (which just happens to be where Worf cut him, a wound recurred throughout the episode), grab his communicator and escape back to the real ship. It's an abrupt conclusion, mitigated somewhat by the coda, in which Riker starts taking down the set of the "Frame of Mind" play, but it doesn't diminish the rest of the episode. Really, with a story this strong which relies so much on confusion and mystery, the ending would have to be a bit of a let-down.

"Mind" is one of the darkest *TNG* episodes yet, and it inspires Frakes to turn in some of his best work in the series. He hasn't had much to do in a while beyond smirk, so it's good to see him get a chance to show off his chops in a role that requires him to be manic and terrified for a large portion of his screen-time. *TNG* has been testing the limits of its format in the past two seasons, for good and bad ("Time's Arrow" springs to mind in the "Dear god, never again!" category), and "Mind" more than justifies the experimentation. I had a great time throughout the episode, trying to guess what would come next, and failing more often than not. For a series to be still capable of surprises this late in its run is a fine thing indeed.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- Henceforth, the Tilonians should be known by their true-name: the Earheads.
- This episode also reminded me of *House*'s "No Reason," in which the good doctor gets shot, and then, well, it gets weird. It's one of my favorite episodes of the show (back when the show was good enough that I could legitimately have favorite episodes from it), so I guess I'm a sucker for this sort of thing.

Next Week: We have our "Suspicious," but finally managed to determine the "Rightful Heir."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Suspensions”/“Rightful Heir”](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[8/18/11 10:00AM](#)

“Suspensions” (first aired 5/8/1993)

Or The One Where Dead Men Walk And Beverly Desecrates a Corpse

Dr. Beverly Crusher should’ve been one of *TNG*’s best characters. She’s smart, she’s a doctor (doctor’s are cool, right?), she’s got red-hair—but most importantly, she’s a likeable, appealing nerd, more stable than Geordi, less alien than Data. In a just world, she could’ve been everything Deanna Troi wasn’t: a strong female character who didn’t exist solely to titillate male fans, someone whose passion and ability were outside the often narrow expectations for genre heroines. Instead, we got someone who was never given the opportunity to live up to her potential. Gates McFadden is a solid actress, but too often, her character has been relegated to back-up roles, interjecting occasional medical jargon to give color to scenes, or else worrying to one side about whether or not Wesley was getting enough fun in his life. Admittedly, she’s part of the ensemble, which means she’s not going to be center-stage all the time; there are plenty of episodes where, say, Riker’s primary contribution is grinning like a jackass, or Data exists only to misinterpret basic sayings. But, much as with Troi, Beverly’s solo outings rarely do well by her. “Remember Me,” whatever my reservations, had the right idea; none of this, “Oh no, I’ve fallen in love with an ambassador so my story has to be all about feelings!” crap. (Weirdly enough, I graded “The Host,” an episode with just that premise, higher than “Remember Me.” Sometimes, I don’t make a whole lot of sense.)

“Suspensions,” in concept, falls into the former category. It has Beverly getting passionate about science, which is all kinds of awesome, and it has her going on adventures and fighting crime—and I’m a fan of these things. Unfortunately, “Suspensions” is also mediocre. While Picard and Data and even Riker get to have grown-up adventures, Beverly is stuck Nancy Drew-ing her way through a mystery populated by uninteresting, generic characters, with a lot of chumped-up drama and a solution that seems clever, but doesn’t make a whole lot of sense.

The good doctor is likeable as ever, but the whole episode has the feel of a bizarre spin-off series that never quite came into focus. It's the sort of story that works only as background television; occasionally smart, never too much of a downer, but best viewed with your mind largely focused on something else.

Oddly enough, "Suspensions" opens with a framing device. Beverly is in her quarters, wearing her civilian clothes and packing, when Guinan comes to visit. Guinan has a story all prepared—she and Geordi were playing tennis, and she thinks she's injured her elbow—but what really happened is that Guinan's magical mentor sense started tingling, and she decided to meddle where she was needed. Beverly brusquely informs Guinan that "I'm not a doctor on this ship anymore," which is a shock, and after sufficient pestering, Guinan gets the good ex-doctor to spill some exposition. About half the episode is taken up with the tale Beverly tells next. It's a not entirely unfamiliar structure, but I'm not really sure why it's necessary. The mystery of just how Beverly lost her job, and just why she's going up for a court martial, isn't a bad way to start us off, but telling events in a more linear fashion might've created more suspense. Or maybe not. This one was never going to be a thrill-a-minute, however it unfolded.

Beverly explains to Guinan that a Ferengi scientist named Dr. Reyga had developed a process of multiphasic shielding. If it worked, the new kind of shield would have huge ramifications for, um, space science. But given that nobody really likes Ferengi (yes, that's right, after nearly six seasons worth of sniveling cartoons, *TNG* has finally decided we need to learn a valuable lesson about judging sentient beings by their species), Reyga is having a difficult time getting the word out. Beverly is so impressed by Reyga's work, and so frustrated by the lack of attention it's getting, that she takes it on herself to invite Reyga aboard the *Enterprise*, so that he can present his work to a group of influential scientists from around the galaxy. Only four of those scientists answer Beverly's evite, but it's a start, and the doctor is so confident in Reyga's work, she's sure that everyone else will be too.

There's a lot to like in this set-up. While a moderately attended conference about a made-up science fiction technology doesn't scream excitement (especially since the importance of the technology is entirely abstract; "multiphasic shield" sounds cool, but it has no inherent meaning, unlike, say, "chronology shifting device"), it's charming to see someone get so worked up about research and knowledge, without there having to be any immediate personal gain involved. *TNG* has all kinds of positive ideas about the future, but the one that always registers the strongest with me is the idea that tomorrow might be a place where people go to celebrate learning. There's a certain degree of pettiness among the scientists Beverly invites—given the turn events take, that pettiness is necessary to make everyone involved a potential suspect. (Besides, considering how far she cast her net with invitations, and how few respond, maybe she just ended up with the dregs.) But that doesn't take away the fact that Beverly was able to arrange all of this on board the ship with a minimum of fuss, for a gathering that wasn't going to make her or the *Enterprise* any money. I'm not doing a good job explaining myself here, and I'm probably over-emphasizing the point as well, but given how much of our culture is suspicious or even hostile to knowledge and study, it's nice to watch a show where the opposite is true.

Plus, there's Beverly, pulling all of this together purely based on her own enthusiasm. In a way, it's surprising that Beverly is the one running all this, and not Geordi, or even Barclay; shields seem more of an engineering concern than a medical one, although Beverly's ability to perform autopsies will become important later on. But this does help add a bit of depth to her character, and it certainly doesn't contradict anything we've seen before. (I even have vague memories of her broad range of interests in the past. Something to do with physics, I think.) And, for all the reasons I've already stated above, it's just neat to have her working on this sort of thing.

But, in case the title didn't clue you in, "Suspensions" isn't just a simple tale of shared study and rigorous debate. To convince the others that his work is a success, Reyga proposes a test drive of the system. Jo'Bril, a Takaran scientist, the first one Beverly's ever met (if this isn't setting off alarm bells, it should), volunteers to pilot a shuttle into the corona of a nearby sun to test the multiphasic shield's strength. The test goes well, right up until the point where it

doesn't, leaving Jo'Bril apparently dead. The other scientists assume that the shield failed, but Reyga refuses to accept this, pleading with Beverly for another test run so he can prove the original failure was a fluke or act of sabotage. But before he can follow through on this, he winds up dead, an apparent suicide, only Beverly doesn't think it *is* a suicide—and of course she's right.

Jo'Bril's the bad guy here, trying to discredit Reyga's research so he can steal it for himself. After his "death," "Suspicious" makes a point of calling to our attention just how odd his corpse is, how there's little cellular degeneration, and how Beverly doesn't know a whole lot about Takara physiology. It's not screamingly obvious—"killing" the criminal is a decent way to throw off the scent, and for a while, I thought the lady Vulcan and her human husband might be responsible, although that would mean disregarding some other clues. (I never thought it was the Klingon.) Beverly's confrontation with Jo'Bril in the shuttle at the end was intense enough, and while Jo'Bril was on the mustache-twirling side, he at least had a halfway decent escape plan. But how the hell did he get out of the morgue? While Jo'Bril was faking his own death, he had to lie in the morgue for days on end. Beverly did an autopsy on him at some point, even, which can't have been comfortable.

While I would've been willing to accept that future autopsies are much more invasive than modern ones, the reason Beverly temporarily loses her job is because she goes ahead and performs an autopsy on Reyga's corpse against his family's wishes. Which would seem to imply that future autopsies affect the body about as much as modern ones do, so how the hell did Jo'Bril survive it? But okay, Beverly didn't know much about the Takarans, so maybe she didn't really do an in-depth, hole-poking study of the so-called corpse. (Although you'd think a doctor would be even more thorough on a body from an unfamiliar species, if only for her own records.) Plus, we're never given specifics on just how resilient Jo'Bril is when he's playing possum, so who knows. That still doesn't explain the ease with which Jo'Bril was able to extricate himself from his corpse drawer, sneak through the ship, and stow away in the shuttle. Beverly ends up stealing for her final attempt to prove the shield works. How did he know which shuttle to pick? How did he know what time to break out of Sick Bay?

Jumping back to the main story, there's also the fact that no one here outside of Beverly really behaves as they normally do. People are initially supportive, but as situation grows more tense, and Beverly becomes increasingly determined to get to the bottom of what's happening, Picard, Riker, and Troi all do their best to get in the way. Picard becomes a sort of impotent father figure, offering promises of threats and moral instruction without putting much effort into backing it up; Riker actually takes Beverly aside and tells her, basically, to shut the hell up and let it go; and Troi is actively worried about Beverly's mental health. They tell her she's obsessed, that she's pushing too hard for answers, and while the episode does its best to make it seem like they have a point, these attempts to create more drama and tension—oh no, will Beverly find the killer before she's taken off the case for good—are too artificial and strained to work. Beverly crosses a line when she breaks down and autopsies Reyga against his family's wishes, but she's never irrational or unhinged. In fact, the behavior of the non-Crusher *Enterprise* crew (excluding Guinan, of course) is surprisingly similar to the behavior of the imaginary crew in "Remember Me." But where those characters were constructs of Beverly's mind who could only behave as she believed they would, the Picard et al. of "Suspicious" are as real as they get.

So, basically, this could've been cool, but isn't, mostly. The mystery relies on sci-fi magic to work, and even then requires a heftier-than-justified suspension of disbelief. The characters, both crew and guests, are shallow and uninspired, and by and large, this feels tossed off; it's understandable that you get the occasional less than perfect episode in a batch of 20-plus, but seems a shame for it to happen to someone who really did deserve better.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- Yes, yes, I know: “Just wait until you get to ‘Sub Rosa.’”
- Convenient how Beverly got her job back and the Ferengi family no longer had any problems with her. I thought her career was in danger because she disobeyed orders, not because she hadn’t solved the case yet. (I guess the Ferengi were so happy she proved Reyga was murdered—and that she executed his killer—that they were able to move on. That still doesn’t cancel out the fact that she disregarded Picard’s commands.)
- This was Guinan’s last appearance on *TNG*. Which is something, I guess.

“Rightful Heir” (first aired: 5/15/1993)

Or The One Where Worf Looks To Find A Reason To Believe

Faith is the art of investing in expectation. You believe in something in the hope that, someday, you’ll find that belief confirmed, either by achieving some kind of transcendence in the afterlife, or by having your regular existence transformed for the better. What’s fascinating is that having that expectation fulfilled means an end to the faith that brought you to that fulfillment. That’s fine if you’re just having faith in, oh I don’t know, becoming a professional writer—once you start publishing your work, you don’t need faith anymore. (You need confidence, which is like faith, but dresses better.) And if you believe in the divinity of Jesus, well, odds are you’ll be able to hold onto that until you die, at which point who cares if you’re thrust into an existential crisis. But what would happen—if you believe Jesus was the Son of God—if you were to open your door tomorrow morning and find him on the stoop? Once you cleaned away the doubts and the second guessing, once you were absolutely sure this was Christ in the flesh, sipping your coffee and complimenting you on the decor... what happens next? And what happens when you try and bring Jesus back to the world?

In “Rightful Heir,” it’s Kahless we’re dealing with, not Jesus, but while he isn’t really a “turn the other cheek” kind of guy, Kahless serves much the same purpose for his people as Jesus did for his. Kahless is a symbol of all that’s good and right in Klingon culture: He defined the warrior spirit, he helped turn violence into something more than just chaos and blood, and he gave his followers an ethos to commit to, a belief that made them a part of something bigger than themselves. Given the sad state of Klingon affairs, with its government struggling to get beyond decades of institutionalized corruption and decadence, it’s only natural that the people may be clamoring for greater spiritual guidance. But that doesn’t mean Gowron, the current head Klingon, is going to be all that happy when Kahless shows up, demanding to take his rightful place on the throne. That’s the problem with these damn heroes of myth—no respect for due process.

“Heir” is another Worf episode, and a much better one than the two-parter from earlier this season. It addresses a problem that’s been building for some time in our favorite security chief, in a way that recognizes the complexity of his situation, as well as allowing him to define his own path. If Beverly is a character who’s never been allowed to live up to her potential, Worf is the opposite, a secondary lead who’s put in his dues in the background, but has been rewarded with a run of showcase episodes that share a gratifyingly consistent level of quality and insight. There are bad apples in the lot (Remember Alexander? “Heir” sure doesn’t!), but not many, and if you were to pull out all the Worf-centric eps from the run of the series and watch them back to back, like a sort of stealth spin-off, I’d bet they’d hold up well. Certainly better than if you did the same with any other major character on the show, apart from Picard and Data.

Worf begins “Heir” in crisis. After the events of “Birthright,” he’s been adrift, missing something in his life but unsure of how to reconnect with his past. After he’s late for a shift on the bridge and nearly sets his apartment on fire doing a Klingon ritual, Picard puts him on mandatory vacation, kicking him off the ship until he can find what he needs and refocus on his duties on the *Enterprise*. Worf heads to Boreth, to join a group of dirty Klingon hippies who spend their days staring into flames hoping for visions. Worf soon gets sick of the process and is about to leave,

when one of the clerics who runs the place convinces him to stick around a little longer. And wouldn't you know it, the next time Worf settles in for a good long look, Kahless appears. Except this isn't a vision—everyone can see him. The Klingon who promised to return over 1,000 years ago has finally made good on his promise. Which is a bit of a head-screw, to be sure.

There are a lot of things that make “Heir” work—its clear, believable view of Klingon culture; the actor playing Kahless (Kevin Conway); and Worf getting a chance to put all the stuff he's learned over the years about himself and his people to good use. What struck me hardest watching it for review was how expertly Ron Moore (working off a story by James Brooks) manages to build up belief in a seemingly impossible revelation. There's no way this Kahless could be the actual Kahless. While *TNG* was never afraid to get vague or semi-magical with its “science,” having someone return from the dead in a purely religious context is beyond the bounds of the show by a fair margin. There had to be some kind of sci-fi explanation for his re-emergence, and we do get one eventually—but until we do, Moore plays things close enough to the vest that I really wasn't sure what was going to happen. Even if I knew, intellectually, Kahless was a phony, emotionally, I was in the same place as Worf—skeptical, but wanting to believe.

It doesn't hurt that Kahless is an amazing guy, and not just because he has a century's worth of epic tales to back him up. Conway plays him exactly as you'd want a Klingon spiritual leader to be: lusty, cheerful, passionate, and, when necessary, profound. There's no sense of ulterior motive in the performance, which makes sense when we learn the truth: this Kahless is actually cloned from the blood of the original Kahless. The clerics on Boreth then implanted all their accumulated knowledge and lore of the real Kahless in the clone's brain, and tried to pass him off as the Second Coming. The cloned Kahless doesn't know any of this, and if “Heir” has a fault, it's that we're never really privy to how he handles the revelation of what he really is. Once the head cleric confesses to Worf, clone Kahless goes quiet, and when he does speak again, he acts much the same as he did before. His fortune changes dramatically in the span of a few hours, going from a reborn messiah to a test tube baby to the new Emperor and spiritual leader of the Klingon empire. That's got to mess with your head.

But hey, this is Worf's story, not Kahless's, and “Heir” is probably better for that. Worf goes from desperate seeker, to skeptic, to passionate follower, to... something else, and Michael Dorn handles each transition ably and convincingly. Kahless's sudden appearance sets off warning bells for Worf, because it's too perfect. “Heir” understands that just because we pray for something (or, for us atheists, just because we yearn for something really, really hard), that doesn't mean we expect our prayers to be answered literally. When Worf travels to Boreth, he's trying to regain the unquestioning devotion to Klingon culture that defined much of his life. He grew up apart from his own race, and that outsider status, as a Klingon in the Federation, meant that his knowledge of who he was supposed to be came purely from books and theory. He aspired to be the purest, most idealized version of Klingonhood, and it was inevitable that when he'd finally reconnect with actual living Klingon culture, he would be disappointed. His time teaching young people in “Birthright”—young people who, while still being raised by Klingon parents, were still in their way as orphaned from their society as Worf had been—reminded him of the purity of faith he once had, while at the same time failing to resolve the disillusionment that has been eroding that purity ever since he got involved with actual Klingon politics. So he goes to Boreth, because that's what a Klingon in spiritual crisis is supposed to do, and he gets exactly what he's supposed to want, and it gets awkward.

There is a period of time when Worf does believe, but it's telling that what converts him (for a while, anyway) is Beverly's scientific proof of the new Kahless's connection to the old one. (She matches his DNA with the sword blood DNA, and of course, they match.) Worf has passed beyond a point where he will blindly accept anything—he wants to believe, he says to Kahless, but the fact that there's a gap between wanting and actual belief shows how much he's changed over the years. He brings Kahless aboard the *Enterprise* to transport him back to the Klingon home-world, and tries to convince the rest of the crew that it's possible they're witnessing a true rebirth. Worf seems

convinced himself, but it's a conviction he sheds at the first sign of doubt, when Kahless, supposedly the greatest Klingon warrior to ever live, loses a fight to Gowron. When Worf learns the truth, he's so amazed by the gall of it that he laughs. The knowledge, the final nail in the coffin of his belief in Klingon idealism (First the government lets him down, now Jesus?) could've made him bitter, but doesn't; and after talking with Data, of all people, he realizes that this is an opportunity. Just because Kahless isn't "real" won't stop people from believing in him. And the Klingon people desperately need someone to believe in.

The episode deals with the potential ramifications of a savior reborn, bringing Gowron back into the picture and showing how reluctant a political leader would be to embrace a spiritual power—but mostly, this is Worf's show. He watches, he considers, and in the end, he's responsible for guiding the Klingon empire back on its course. He begins the story adrift; then he gets what he thinks he wants, and realizes it isn't what he needed it to be. But instead of losing his way again or giving up entirely, Worf realizes that faith is what matters, not the fulfillment. His own faith goes from an unquestioning devotion to something more mature. He respects the ideals Kahless represents, without the need to invest in the man himself. That gives him the maturity to recognize what the others fail to see: The cloned Kahless is still a symbol of what could be. For someone who's spent much of his life blindly worshiping a culture that continually failed to deserve such commitment, Worf is someone who understands how important ideals can be, even if they remain forever outside your grasp.

Grade: A

Stray Observations:

- Picard and the others, except for Data, are skeptical of Kahless' legitimacy. While they're right to be skeptical, the way the episode is constructed, I felt more on Worf's side than theirs; for once, that seemed like an intentional choice.
- Data is terrific in this episode. His speech—about deciding to try and raise above the limits of his programming by believing himself to be capable of more—was unexpected and powerful. ("Unexpected" just because the rest of the episode was so Worf-centric, I didn't think Data would get the spotlight when he did.)
- "So I chose to believe that I was a person, that I had a potential to be more than a collection of circuits and sub-processors."
- Every time I see Gowron, I want to cup my hands so I can catch his eyes when they pop out of his skull.

Next week: We see if there are "Second Chances," and then explore the "Timescape."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Second Chances”/“Timescape”](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[8/25/11 10:00AM](#)

“Second Chances” (first aired May 22, 1993)

Or The One Where Riker Doesn’t Make Out With Himself, But Could’ve

On the one hand, “Second Chances” is a mild, laid-back melodrama about characters facing choices and versions of themselves they’d thought long abandoned into the past. Troi gets another romance (although thankfully, this one isn’t humiliating or horrific), and Riker gets a chance to see first hand how he would’ve reacted if his life had gone differently than he’d planned. It’s all very pleasant and a little sad. On the other hand, “Second Chances” is a huge mind-blow, to a degree that I don’t think the writers really take into account. The premise is, well, not straightforward exactly, but it seems to fit in the same lines as [“The Enemy Within”](#) from *TOS*: a transporter malfunction creates two Rikers. Unlike “Enemy,” these Rikers are functionally identical at the moment of creation, but for one fundamental difference. The first Riker, our Riker, was successfully beamed off of Nerval Four eight years ago, going on to live a life that led to his current position, as the First Officer of the *Enterprise*. The second Riker was left on Nerval, and due to an atmospheric condition that renders transporters inoperable on the planet for years at a time, he had to fend for himself on the station, right up until Riker1 and an away team beam down to pull the station’s data records.

Pretty cool, right? Very cool, in fact, and while “Chances” isn’t drop-dead amazing or anything, it’s got a terrific hook, and it does a decent job living up to that premise. (Unlike other episodes I watched this week.) But what amazes me is how much the existence of Riker2 should change things in the *Trek*-verse. Kirk’s bifurcation in “Enemy” happened after the transporters were exposed to an alien ore—it would be theoretically possible to replicate the mishap, but you never get the sense anyone on the old *Enterprise* was taking rigorous enough notes for that sort of experiment. (Or any notes at all, really.) On *TNG*, though, some weeks it’s like the crew does

nothing *but* take notes. Even more importantly, there's no weird ore required to pull off the malfunction that created Riker. If I'm getting the fiction science right, the two Rikers were created when the tech who was trying to beam Riker off the planet hit some interference, and created a second transporter pattern, identical to the first, to reinforce the beam. That second pattern got bounced back to the station, where it reformed into Riker2, just as Riker1 was arriving on the orbiting ship. Basically, by creating two beams, the tech inadvertently created two Rikers, and, well, that seems like it could be a big deal, right? I guess there's some hand-waving about frequencies being exactly aligned, and we're supposed to come away from this thinking it's a once-in-1,000-a year coincidence, but... well, to look at it another way, this is a way of creating exact duplicates of people with no apparent drawbacks or restrictions if you can refine the process. That just seems like it would be useful.

Okay, maybe I'm getting overly enthusiastic—*Trek*, and science fiction in general (especially sci-fi series, which generally try and maintain a base level status quo, and as such, don't generally embrace massive, earth-shattering discoveries), has a history of throwing out crazy stuff and then letting it drop through the cracks between episodes. It's fun to speculate, but I wouldn't say it's a huge flaw in the episode. But there's something so mundane about "Chances" that you can't help but poke around for something more. I'm off two minds (Ha!) on this episode—which means that, yes, you're about to get yet another review in which I piece together my thoughts and impressions as I type, rather than me approaching the material with a cogent thesis already in mind. I'd be sorry about that, but honestly, I get paid either way. (Bonus honesty: *All* my reviews are basically like that. Even the ones which seem to have cohesion. You type enough sentences, you're bound to get a good run of paragraphs eventually.)

In my first mind: "Chances" most exciting moment happens in the cold open. No, I don't mean Riker's thwarted jazz solo. (Although—brief digression—I know it's supposed to be charming and prankish of Troi to push Riker to perform a solo he's avoiding, and I realize Ten Forward is about as low pressure a performance environment as you can come up with outside the womb, but it's a bit mean. He's spent years working on something, and he's never gotten it right. The odds of him suddenly nailing the solo now, in front of everyone, are slim to none.) When Riker comes face to face with Riker2, without any warning to him or to us of what's about to happen, it's a great shock. Presumably, this shock was ruined for anyone who read *TV Guide* in 1993, but dramatically speaking, it's a fine beat whether you're prepared for it or not. But as the episode progresses, there's never really anything to top this. The explanation for why Riker2 exists is about as mundane as a "I just discovered another me" explanations can be. Sure, it says all kinds of cool stuff about the transporter, but this episode isn't about the transporter, and Geordi's little speech about what happened is the beginning and end of the science-fiction element. The rest of "Chances" might as well be the story of two brothers who haven't seen each other in a long time, at least in terms of plot mechanics. There's some thematic stuff about what makes us who we are, and how we keep on making the same choices even when our situations have changed (there's a reason for that title, after all), but all of this is very low-key. Riker2 has been around for eight years by the time the *Enterprise* finds him. There's nothing physically wrong with him, there's no sudden twist that one Riker or the other has to die (although apparently this was considered, in a Spider-man Clone Saga kind of way). Riker2 shows up, spars a bit with our Riker, hits on Troi, and then decides to call himself Thomas and sign on with another ship. The episode presents us with a conundrum, but then never puts much energy into resolving it, or using it to rile anyone up, apart from Troi, who tends to spend her time on ship in a state of constant riling already.

But in my second mind: There's something to be said for taking such an outlandish premise and handling it as realistically and straightforwardly as possible. While "Chances" lacks a lot of overt shocks or twists, its thoughtful approach is, in its way, pretty darn subversive. Once we establish that Riker2 is real as real, and that the nature of his creation poses no threat to anyone, he's treated as completely and reasonably human as the rest of the ensemble. In fact, most of the episode is told from Riker2's perspective—or at least, more of it is from his perspective than from our Riker's, which is an odd but neat choice. This is an episode that requires more of the viewer, in that it doesn't

spell out all the strangeness. Like the fact that Riker2 and Troi pick up again where our Riker and Troi left off years ago. Or the obvious frustration both Rikers have with each other. Riker2, having spent so much time on his own with little hope of rescue, is more mercurial, more willing to take risks and less willing to accept orders. Our Riker isn't a fan of this, and it's doubtful either man is all that happy to meet a slightly skewed version of himself; for our Riker, it's clear evidence of his faults, and for Riker2, it's getting to meet the guy who stole your life. This conflict is played out via strained expressions and the occasional shouting, and has as happy an ending as it could've when Riker saves Riker2 from death while the two are doing repairs under the station on Nerval Four. When Thomas Riker leaves, Will Riker gives him his trombone as a parting gift, which is nice of him.

Maybe a little too nice, really. While I like "Second Chances" more than I dislike it, I do think the episode short-changes the drama in favor of *TNG*'s standard, "Everybody really can get along if we're all polite and patient with each other" approach. Riker2 spends nearly a decade in isolation, keeping himself alive through improvisation and, I'm guessing, a fair bit of luck. Then finally someone comes to rescue him, and he can go back to the life he had and the love he left. He tells Troi that thinking of her, the hope of seeing her again and being with her again (every time anyone on this show says "I want to be with you," I assume they're talking about sex), is what got him through the rough patches. And you have to imagine that there were some *seriously* rough patches on Nerval, days when suicide must've looked very, very attractive. But he had love to pull him through, and he had the same determination and energy we've seen our Riker display on the series. This guy is an adventurer to the core, and while getting stuck in a few small rooms millions of miles from anyone isn't exactly a romp, it's not implausible that he'd manage to get through it.

And then he meets himself, and everything he's spent eight years waiting for falls apart. As much as I'd like to believe that Riker would be reasonable in either form, I don't think there's a reasonable solution to that, at least not an easy one. Near the end of the episode, our Riker rescues Riker2, which helps mend some fences. The length of time Riker2 has been away from Starfleet makes the split between the two of them easier to take, since Will Riker's position on the *Enterprise* isn't something that Thomas Riker ever knew to long for. But identity is a tricky business, and it's not as logical as "Chances" would have us believe. Thomas' choice at the end is reassuringly sensible and non-stabby, but sometimes, *TNG*'s commitment to reasonability is, well, unreasonable. Sometimes, people need to go a little mad to be believable. This is one of those times. Riker2 spends most of "Chances" acting a little on edge (and Frakes does a decent job differentiating between his two selves), but that never goes anywhere. He takes to prolonged isolation and being forced to be the "not-Will" Riker with a surprising, and not entirely believable, aplomb.

But then, I guess that's part of being a hero. "Chances" is a good episode, and if the review is more rambling than usual, that's because I'm trying to pinpoint what stops it, to me, from being a *great* episode. Riker2 and Troi's courting is sweet and melancholic, and that's a rarity for *TNG*; and the resignation on Troi's face when Thomas tells her he's leaving the ship speaks volumes. She clearly still has feelings for Riker that she's never entirely gotten over, and the opportunity to embrace those feelings again is irresistible. And yet it's doomed from the start, because for all his different experiences, Riker2 is, at heart, as ambitious and driven as Will, and as much as he tries to deny it, given the same choice Will was given, between a relationship and his career, he's going to take the latter. This is an episode that arrives at its conclusions a little too easily for my taste, but that doesn't make those conclusions less valid. We all think about second chances from time to time, but it's the first chances that define us; and as much as we may wish otherwise, we can't ever leave them behind.

Grade: B+

Stray observations:

- I do really, really love the fact that Thomas Riker survives the episode. Now *there's* a spin-off series.
- “You always had the better hand... in everything.” Ooo, poker burn!
- While I do feel bad for Troi, surely she didn't expect Thomas would be able to stay on the ship? Even discounting his ambition, having two Rikers would be tremendously confusing. (As well as a drain on the show's budget.)
- Levar Burton directed this episode. It's his first time in the director's chair, and he did a fine job; this is an actor-heavy ep, and everyone involved does fine work.
- Another spin-off I'd like to see: Data and Worf, discussing philosophy and fighting crime.

“Timescape” (first aired 6/12/1993)

Or *The One Where Time Is Out Of Joint*

Everybody's had a good idea for a sci-fi or fantasy or horror story at some point. Getting a single good idea isn't that difficult, at least when you don't *need* to come up with one. Writers will tell you the difference between a good idea and a story is the actual hard work of writing it down, and that's true, but there's also the fact that good idea on its own isn't much of anything. A good idea isn't a *story*, it's just a way into a story, and if you can't come up with the follow-through, you aren't going to get very far. And what's really tricky is trying to find a way to explain the good idea. The more effort it takes to provide a logical reason behind some really arresting image you've stumbled across, the worse the story's going to be. Explanations require an organic elegance—when revealed, it should seem like there's no other answer to the questions you've been asking. The minute the audience sees the work that goes into suspending their disbelief, that's the minute you start to lose them. It's a hard line to walk, and examples of failed attempts at exposition and explanation litter the genre landscape like ungainly corpses. “Timescape” is a lively corpse for the most part, and one I enjoyed a lot at the start. But once it starts throwing down answers, things go from mysterious to silly in a hurry.

Let's at least savor those first two acts while we can, shall we? A quick double shot of scenes on the *Enterprise* tells us Riker is scared of Data's cat (understandably, considering the size of the scratches the cat leaves on his forehead), and also sets the plot in motion, although we won't know exactly how for a while yet. The ship receives a distress signal from a Romulan ship, Riker tells Worf to make plans to assist the Romulans—carefully—and then we cut to a runabout (a slightly larger than usual shuttle) carrying Picard, Geordi, Troi, and Data. All four of them are headed back home after attending one of season six's legendary interstellar conferences: This one was about the psychological effects of long-term deep space missions, which, you'll be delighted to hear, has exactly nothing to do with the rest of the episode. Troi and Picard regale the others about embarrassing and/or tedious experiences they had during their sessions—an expert on inter-species mating hit on Troi, and Picard suffered through a lecturer so boring he didn't even realize he was speaking on the wrong topic—and it's all very charming. But then, everybody but Troi freezes for maybe 20 seconds. When they unfreeze, they have no memory of the time loss, and Data's internal clock is still in sync with the shuttle's computer. Troi starts to wonder if she didn't imagine the whole thing, but then she falls, and when she comes to, the others tell her that this time, *she* was the frozen one.

Something strange is going on, and “Timescape” is never better than when it follows our four heroes in their efforts to unravel the strangeness. A few more temporal oddities pop up—like an engine that burns through all of its fuel as though it had been running constantly for 47 days, or a bowl of fruit that rots in an instant, and has such a fast-running time bubble around it that Picard essentially burns his hand with aging when he reaches inside. Data determines that the entire area is littered with time bubbles, small-to-moderate sized anomalies which speed up, slow down, or otherwise interfere with normal chronology. When the shuttle arrives at the point in space where they're supposed to rendezvous with the *Enterprise*, the other ship never arrives, and when they finally find her, it's obvious

why she's late: The *Enterprise* is frozen alongside a Romulan Warbird, apparently in the middle of battle. And if it is a battle, the *Enterprise* is losing.

The image of the two ships hanging suspended in time and space is a great one, and a natural conclusion of the build-up of the first part of the episode. The rest of "Timescape" is on the downhill side. That's not a huge surprise, really; the weirdness that pulls you into the story is cool in no small part because it's seemingly inexplicable, and the explaining part of mysteries is nearly always duller than the set-up. (Even learning that the shuttle was flying through time-bubbles was a bit of a let-down. All of sudden, eerie horror is transformed into moderate science-fiction inconvenience.) But *TNG* has had plenty of stories with decent or even powerful reveals. The backstory of ["The Survivors"](#) turned something spooky into a powerful tragedy of loss and misspent vengeance, and while "Timescape" probably wasn't going to hit that level of emotional complexity, it at least could've managed something like the end of ["Schisms,"](#) which provided enough information to justify what had happened, and then got out of the way. Instead, we get a story that tries for a big concept, but pushes too much into too little time, leaving us with a resolution that feels more than a little forced into existence.

Before that can happen, we have to spend some time with our heroes poking around on the frozen ships, because hey, why not? Geordi works up personal shields for everyone to prevent them from being frozen with the rest of the *Enterprise* crew—the shields are imperfect, initially making Troi dizzy before eventually sending Picard into hysterics. Amusing/freaky as it is to see Picard laughing uncontrollably and drawing smiley faces into semi-frozen clouds, the "space-time madness" subplot is padding, plain and simple. I don't object to the reminder that it's dangerous for Picard and the others to move inside the displaced time, but the fact that Picard's collapse doesn't add anything to the story *or* create new difficulties (apart from meaning Picard has to stay behind on the shuttle for a little while), is sloppy writing.

The tableau which Picard, Troi and Data discover aboard the *Enterprise* are appropriately dramatic: On the bridge, it looks like a Romulan is attacking Riker, and in Sick Bay, a Romulan has actually fired on Beverly, hitting her in the stomach with a now-paused disruptor ray. (Which looks totally cool, by the way.) Worst of all, Data discovers a warp-core breach in engineering, and through that breach, Data learns that what they thought was stopped time is actually just time moving at an infinitesimal rate. That means that Picard and the others will have to figure out what happened before time slowed to a crawl, figure out what caused the crawl, and figure out some way to prevent disaster and resolve the issue, before the warp core breach slowly but surely engulfs the ship. They've got nine hours, which is just enough time to make the work possible, but not so much time that it kills the suspense.

In the interest of adding even more suspense, we see a supposedly time-stuck Romulan blinking in Sick Bay. If this seems familiar, it should—almost the same exact scene occurred in ["The Next Phase,"](#) a season five episode that had Geordi and Ensign Ro wandering around invisible after a transporter accident. There, the sudden twist that Geordi and Ro weren't alone did a great job of goosing the ep into its final acts; here, it's a big piece of the puzzle of why all this is happening, and it's also the most problematic aspect of "Timescape." Because the blinking Romulan isn't actually a Romulan at all, but an alien being whose taken over a Romulan body. She and her mate (who also grabbed a Romulan host) were using the artificial singularity in the Romulan engine core as a nest to incubate their young. Normally they would've used a black hole, but I guess those aren't easy to find, and maybe they had dinner plans they just couldn't get out of, so they dumped their kids into the Romulan ship. Then it went horribly wrong, and when the *Enterprise* came to help the Romulans, not knowing the situation was more complicated than just an engine failure, the aliens showed up, grabbed a couple of warm bodies to invade, and made things worse.

That's sort of cool. It's reverse engineered, in that the writers started with "time keeps on skipping!" and then tried to figure out some way to justify the premise, but hey, that's not the end of the world. The problem is, we barely get to know either of these aliens before they (somewhat conveniently) disappear—first they assault one of the heroes,

and then the shock of the assault sends them off to the Phantom Zone, or makes them cease to exist, or whatever. The reverse engineering becomes more obvious when its result doesn't have much character beyond its function as a plothole-plugger. Plus, their behavior doesn't make much sense. Why are they just hanging around? Why don't they make any attempt to communicate with Picard or anyone else before they attack? After Picard cleverly uses the runabout to interrupt the power transfer between the *Enterprise* and the Romulan ship that would've caused the *Enterprise*'s warp-core breach, the Romulan ship—and the second not-a-Romulan alien—both disappear. Why? And why isn't anyone even a little bothered by any of this?

There are plenty of cool moments in "Timescape" to keep it from being a waste. The episode makes good use of time manipulation in all sorts of clever ways, building to the final attempt to save everyone's life in which Data rigs a system (using the alien young trapped in the Romulan ship) to reverse time back far enough to allow him and the others to manipulate events. It's convenient that every seemingly damning tableau of the Romulans turns out to be innocuous; they really were just trying to evacuate their ship, having no idea the root cause of their problems. But it's not distractingly convenient. No, what keeps this episode from really delivering is the rushed, poorly thought through fourth act reveal, and a sub-par coda in which Data is humorously attempting to test the veracity of yet another human idiom. (This time, he's studying to see if a watched pot ever boils. Hilarity!) The cooler the mystery, the more important it is that the solution makes sense. What we get here is too close to "aliens = magic," and lacks *TNG*'s usually insightful follow-through.

Grade: B

Stray Observations:

- Is this the Season of Troi? Between this episode and ["Face Of The Enemy,"](#) she's holding her own lately.

Next week: We make our "Descent, Part 1," and I throw together a few overall thoughts on season six.

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Descent, Part 1”/Sixth season wrap-up](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[9/01/11 10:00AM](#)

“Descent, Part 1”

Or The One Where Data Seconds That Emotion

The poker game that opens this episode may be one of the most memorable scenes in *TNG*’s history. People who are even vaguely familiar with the series are aware that Picard was Borg-ified at one point, but understanding what that means requires a fair amount of knowledge of the show’s world. Knowing Data played poker with Einstein, Sir Isaac Newton (John Neville, for some reason) and Stephen Hawking, on the other hand, is easy to grasp straight off. Oh sure, it helps if you know that Data is using the holodeck to recreate these famous scientific geniuses from the (his) past, but the names themselves carry enough weight on their own to be memorable. Plus, Hawking plays himself, which must’ve earned a few news stories. It’s a neat concept, and I don’t have any trouble believing Data would try it, but in practice it’s a mixed blessing. Hawking is fine (really, he doesn’t have to do anything but show up), Newton’s pissiness is amusing, and there are some fun nerdy Easter eggs. But Einstein’s make-up is distractingly hideous, and there’s no real point to the scene beyond a cutesy “Hey, look what we can do.” The conversation isn’t relevant to the plot or the themes of the rest of the episode, apart from the fact that Data’s present. We’ve had unconnected cold opens before, but in the past, they featured multiple characters from the regular ensemble, which made for some nice character moments. Here, Data doesn’t say a whole lot. Plus, this is the first part in a two part episode, and like I’ve said before, two part episodes have to be even more careful about how they use time.

The rest of “Descent” toes the same good/bad line, generally staying more to the good (or at least interesting) side, but ending with a cliffhanger that doesn’t give me huge hopes for part two. The Borg are back, although they aren’t really the Borg anymore. Data feels an emotion, which should be a huge moment for the show, but isn’t. (It doesn’t

help that “Data with emotions” is just “Lore.”) But at it’s best, the show does suggest a sense of the epic, and the impression that the Federation as a whole is in danger, not just the *Enterprise*. It ain’t art, but it at least feels like a story that needed two episodes to cover. Data’s struggles are actually very relevant to the plot, and past that cold open, there’s not a lot of aimless wandering around. There is also a very silly scene in which a member of the Borg essentially seduces Data to the dark side. So, there are some problems.

The *Enterprise* gets a distress call Ohniaka Three. They arrive to find a strange ship orbiting the planet, and no life signs from the outpost below. Riker, Worf, Data, and Dead Meat Ensign #1 beam down, and after getting a good long look at all the dead bodies in the place, open a door to find a live Borg standing behind it. And he’s not the only one. A fight ensues, in which two important events occur: One of the Borg expresses anger at seeing another Borg shot, and then refers to the dead Borg by name (sort of a “His name was Robert Paulson” type moment); and Data, upon being attacked by another Borg, gets angry, first wrenching the Borg’s hand from his throat and then beating the creature to death. (Also, Dead Meat Ensign #1 gets herself shot and killed. Get used to that sort of thing. It happens a lot this episode.) While the away team is struggling to stay alive, the mysterious ship orbiting the planet opens fire on the *Enterprise*.

Our heroes win the day—the Borg and their ship escape after a few minutes fighting—but they’re left with a few unsettling questions. The Borg have always been about assimilation, not outright murder, but these Borg offed everybody on Ohniaka Three for no apparent reason. And they have names? Names (and pronouns) mean personal identities, and the only Borg with a personal identity that the *Enterprise* crew know of is Hugh, the lovable ship mascot from [“I, Borg.”](#) Hugh developed a distinct sense of self from his time with Beverly Crusher and Geordi, and, when it came time to release him back into the wild, instead of programming him with a virus which could theoretically destroy all the Borg in one fell swoop, Picard let him go without alteration. Except he’d already been changed, and that change was downloaded into the Borg hive mind, and who’s to say what happened next? *Something’s* going on, anyway, and Picard alerts the Federation, and puts the *Enterprise* on continuous alert.

While this is going on, Data has removed himself from active duty because of his outburst. This makes sense; it deprives the *Enterprise* of one of its most valuable officers in the midst of a serious crisis, but that crisis means that everyone needs to be working at their best. If Data is suffering under occasional bursts of psychosis (and since he has no idea why he’s suddenly experiencing anger, and apparently doesn’t have control over himself when the feeling hits, “psychosis” would seem to apply here), there’s no guarantee he won’t behave irrationally at a moment when irrational behavior would endanger the lives of himself and others. Picard takes a lecture from Starfleet command about his handling of the Hugh Incident, and Data does everything he can to recreate his experience on Ohniaka, discussing his experience with Troi and using the Holodeck to simulate the Borg attack. These two plot threads come to a head when the *Enterprise* catches up with the Borg ship they’ve been chasing (which, by the way, doesn’t look anything like a Borg ship, at least not one we’ve ever seen before). A small group of Borg beam onto the *Enterprise*’s bridge, in a scene reminiscent of Picard’s kidnapping in [“Best Of Both Worlds, Part 1,”](#) but instead of grabbing Jean-Luc and beaming away, the Borg here are quickly defeated. One survivor is left. Beverly fixes him as best she can, and then it’s time for some interrogating—although the answers Picard and Data get aren’t exactly what they’d hoped for.

The pressure on both to get those answers is intense. Picard is dealing with the aftermath of “I, Borg”; his momentous decision to release Hugh without using Hugh as a weapon against the Borg is coming back to haunt him. First, there’s Admiral Alynna Nechayev, who beams onto the ship to give Picard his marching orders along with a very pissed-off lecture about how much he’s upset everyone by not committing genocide. It’s a complicated issue, no question, and I appreciate the show’s willingness to question its hero’s behavior. “I,Borg” was a tricky episode, and while it made sense that Picard would do what he did, it wouldn’t be realistic if his decision hadn’t caused some problems back home. What doesn’t work, though, is the way Nechayev delivers the rebuke. She’s yet another in a

seemingly endless parade of jerkwad officials, and the sadistic pleasure she apparently gets from lecturing Picard—it has an “Oh, you think you’re so *smart*” vibe—changes the scene from a discussion of ethics to a one-sided rant. It’s important that Picard feels threatened and guilty, as that motivates his behavior through the rest of the episode (and, hopefully, part two), but there are better ways to achieve this than what we see here.

Data’s storyline may be the most interesting of the episode, right up until it goes off the rails. (And even then, it’s interesting, just not *good* interesting.) When Data snaps at the Borg attacking him, it’s unsettling for (mostly) the right reasons. Sure, Brent Spiner’s displays of emotion remain, as ever, over-the-top and way too smirky, but this is Data we’re talking about. Data isn’t supposed to get pissed off. It’s one thing if he laughs (which he did back in [“Deja Q.”](#) an incident this episode apparently forgets), but getting angry? And not just angry, seriously, thoroughly enraged; he doesn’t just fling the Borg off him, he smashes the creature’s head into a wall multiple times. Later, when discussing the incident with Troi, he says he felt another emotion as well, after seeing the Borg dead on the floor, an emotion he can only describe as... pleasure. Really, *really* not good. It’s an interesting direction for the character, and one that could’ve been a great culmination of Data’s development over the course of the series. As he says to Troi, if he ever realizes his dream of becoming human, if these emotions he’s suddenly experiencing are signs that he’s at a crossroads, where’s the guarantee he’ll be a good man? Troi waves this away, but people feel ugly feelings all the time. Given how much Data has struggled to grasp simple idioms, I’m not sure I want to see how he handles enraged jealousy or frustrated desire.

On the page, “Descent” is putting two of *TNG*’s most reliably stalwart characters, the two of the ensemble who have always been the most trustworthy and dependable in a crisis, and putting them through the wringer. Picard is faced with the possibility that one of his choices—a choice he made himself, with no Borg modifications to blame it on—may have resulted in making the Borg an even more dangerous threat than before. Data is confronted with the fact that the thing he’s wanted most for his entire life may not be such a good thing after all. That should lead to some intense drama, but it doesn’t. Patrick Stewart makes the most of it (he looks haunted for most of the episode), and Data’s quest for answers is compelling enough, but whatever depth the story has gets tossed out the window once the *Enterprise* gets ahold of the Borg prisoner. Identifying himself as “Crosis,” the Borg tells Picard that he has a new mission: to kill all inferior life, at the order of “The One.” Picard plays the Locutus card, and gets no response, as much confirmation as anything else that this not the usual Borg. Then, when Data goes to study Crois, Crois fiddles with something on his arm, and Data starts getting angry again.

This is a very silly scene, partly because we get a lot of Brent Spiner trying to do “growing rage,” and partly because it’s just so blatant and forced. Crois actually asks Data if he would kill his closest friend to be able to “feel,” and Data says, “Yes.” Which is terribly silly. I suppose there is a way this could’ve been played that would’ve made it believable; after all, Data has been struggling for emotions for a long time, and *TNG* has never completely shied away from the essential other-ness of the character. His decision making process is close enough to our own to make it easy to assume Data is, for all his protestations, basically human—but he isn’t. The scene between Crois and Data could’ve been a great chance to exploit this, but it instead plays too overtly, almost comically villainous. Which makes it harder to be shocked when Data winds up freeing Crois and helping him escape aboard a shuttle. Clearly, events are being manipulated to reach a predetermined outcome.

The misjudgment of the scene also telegraphs that outcome; if not specifically, then at least conceptually. The question, “Is Data being tempted?” becomes irrelevant; between the Borg fiddling with his equipment (heh), and the speed of Data’s fall, it isn’t hard to realize that Data’s “emotions” are part of the same game that’s got the Borg acting so strangely, a game presumably controlled by the mysterious “One” that Crois keeps going on about. There’s a lot of hunting around, and some technically interesting details when Picard basically dumps most of the crew of the *Enterprise* on a strange planet to help search for Data and the rest of the Borg (Beverly is made captain!), but really, it’s all just waiting for that final, inevitable reveal. Picard, Troi, Geordi, and a bunch of Dead

Meats find a building; they enter; the Borg surround them on all sides; and Lore, Data's corrupt "brother" reveals himself as the mastermind. Data's now working with him—another development so over-the-top that it has nothing to do with character—and Lore wants to destroy the Federation. I'm hoping next week will be some, crazy adventures, but I've given up hope on the story showing any of the depth or insight which *TNG* usually aims for. Which doesn't mean I've given up hope that I'll be wrong.

Grade: B

Stray observations:

- This episode may have one of the most inadvertently hilarious background-character-mortality rates I've ever seen on the show. Whenever you see an unfamiliar face (or faces) in a group of regular cast members, and that group wanders into danger, the unfamiliar faces die almost immediately. I mean, I get that's gonna happen from time to time, but you really shouldn't pull the same trick multiple times in a single episode.
- Captain Beverly Crusher. Niiice.
- If it turns out that Lore isn't controlling the rogue Borg via his emotion chip, and somehow projecting his emotions onto Data to control him as well (maybe using some kind of emotional assimilation?), boy will my face be red.

That does it for *TNG*'s sixth season—and it's been a good season by and large, certainly better than I was expecting. Looking over the episode list, season six gave us at least two outright classics ("[Chain Of Command, Part 2](#)" and "[Tapestry](#)"), several excellent episodes, some ambitious storylines that didn't quite come to fruition and a few misfires. And even the misfires ("[Aqui!](#)," "[Time's Arrow, Part 2](#)," among others) had a smart idea or decent performance to keep them from being complete wastes of time. Once a show finally clicks together, once the members of the ensemble settle into their respective roles and the writers get a handle on the environment and what sort of plotlines and themes that environment can support, even "bad" episodes feel like a piece of a larger puzzle. *TNG*'s first season was a wreck for a lot of reasons, but what made it such an unpalatable, distracting experience is the way it never really settled into anything approaching consistency of purpose. The series was already beginning to gel by its second season, and at this point, everybody knows what they're supposed to be doing, and roughly how they should be doing it. We may be in for some bumpy road for the show's seventh and final season, but I feel comfortable assuming that, no matter how bad it gets, that connective tissue, that sense of place will remain.

Best character: Captain Jean-Luc Picard

Now, this almost feels like cheating—I'm not sure I could think of a season of the show when Picard *wasn't* a stand-out—but given that he's the focus of the season's two best episodes, and given how much both those episodes depend on Patrick Stewart's performance and the richness he and the writers have brought to Picard over the years, I wouldn't feel right picking out anyone else. I theorized briefly in my "[Tapestry](#)" review that it's possible to view *TNG* as a show more about Picard than it is about anyone else, or even the ensemble as a whole. Unlike *TOS*, which was defined by Kirk's relationship with Spock (his Ego) and McCoy (his Id), on this *Enterprise*, the captain stands alone (as "[Lessons](#)" so politely reminded us), and it's his narrative which has been largely responsible for the series' greatest triumphs. In season six, Picard endured (and was broken by) torture, fell in love and had to let it go, accepted that his life was the sum of his failures *and* successes, and he didn't have to deal with Lwaxana Troi. Not a bad run.

Runner-up: Commander William T. Riker. Season six spent a lot of time messing with Riker's mind—"[Schisms](#)," "[Frame Of Mind](#)," and "[Second Chances](#)"—to great effect.

Most-improved character: Counselor Deanna Troi

Seriously. I'm as surprised as you! But while Troi started off the season in a low place (with ["Man Of The People,"](#) in which she once again was seduced by an ambassador who wasn't exactly what he appeared to be), she gained ground fast. By ["A Fistful Of Datas,"](#) she'd proven herself capable of keeping up with Worf; "Chain Of Command" finally gave her an excuse to wear a regular uniform, instead of the bare shoulder fan service outfit she'd been stuck with for so many years; "Face Of The Enemy" had her holding her own against a ship full of Romulans. This is less a case of a character developing and growing over time, and more a case of writers finally figuring out how to present Troi in the way she always should have been presented. Her empathic abilities, never clearly defined and almost always more distracting than useful to storylines, have been largely sidelined; she's still doing counseling work and sensing things, but the focus is more on her intelligence and training than any innate, overly nebulous gifts. Troi still isn't the show's strongest character, or its second strongest, but after this season, she's no longer an embarrassment. It's just too bad it took the show this long to realize what the character, and Marina Sirtis, were capable of.

Runner-up: Guinan, but only because she's leaving.

Best guest star: Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott (James Doohan)

TNG has done a good job of managing the occasional *TOS* guest star; Sarek's two appearances arguably gave the actor more to work with than in all his other appearances on *TOS* and the movies combined, and while the Spock's episode wasn't nearly as strong as ["Sarek,"](#) the character's legacy escaped unscathed. Seeing Scotty in ["Relics,"](#) one of the early episodes of the sixth season, was a minor revelation—James Doohan's few Scotty-centric episodes in *TOS* weren't very strong, and his spots in the movies reduced him to a benign set-up for Kirk's jokes. He's not as tormented as Sarek or ambitious as Spock, but the Scotty of "Relics" is smart, capable and fun to hang out with, and the episode itself manages to find a way to both bring the character into the show's time period without cheating, and give him a send off he deserves. It's a little corny, but it's also a little great, and that's what the original *Trek* was really all about.

Runner-up: Gul Madred (David Warner). Depending on my mood, I could easily give him the top slot instead of Scotty. Warner is incredible as one of the most unsettling and dangerous villains *TNG* ever produced.

Worst Historical Guest Star: Samuel Clemens (Jerry Hardin)

From "Time's Arrow, Part 2," a low point of the season. Every time I look at that screenshot of him and Troi, I wince.

Runner-up: Albert Einstein (see above—and I'm not going to single out the actor, because, again, it's the make-up job)

Best episode that would work in a double feature with *Inception*: "Ship In A Bottle"

Best episode that's a bit like a Bruce Willis movie: "Starship Mine"

Runner-up: "A Fistful Of Datas." (I've never seen *Last Man Standing*, but I'm assuming the two are very close.)

Best episode in which Picard gets laid: "Tapestry"

Runner-up: "Lessons"

Most effective attempt to engender empathy for an inanimate object: The exocomp, "Quality Of Life"

Runner-up: The quick-rotting fruit of "Timescape"

Worst episode: “Time’s Arrow, Part 2”

The disappointing conclusion to a story that wasn’t all that well introduced at the end of season five, “Time’s Arrow, Part 2” is sloppy and dull, mismanaging a chance to finally give Guinan a purpose on the show beyond “mystical bartender in a weird hat.” It’s got the awful Samuel Clemens, it’s got bad science-fiction ideas, and it’s got an alien threat that never really makes sense beyond the fact that it kind of looks cool. What’s not to hate?

Runner-up: “Aquiël”

Best episode: “Chain Of Command, Part 2”

There were a number of two part storylines in this season, and most of them weren’t so great; apart from “Best Of Both Worlds,” *TNG* has never really mastered the discipline and scope required to make long-form episodes work. “Chain Of Command” is not exactly an exception to this rule. [“Part 1”](#) is all right, but scattered, and it’s obvious throughout that it’s main purpose is to get us to the second half. This would be more a problem if “Part 2” wasn’t phenomenal. In one of the starkest, most horrifying hours the show ever produced, Picard is tortured by a Cardassian who asks for information, but really wants obedience. A powerful meditation on the power of mental and physical violence, “Chain Of Command, Part 1” has the rare honesty to admit that, in the face of some evils, heroism and will-power aren’t sufficient protection. Nothing is. *TNG* has never been this direct before or since, and that’s probably for the best—given what we’ve seen of the rest of the run, I’m not sure the show could manage to be this raw on a week to week basis. But that doesn’t make “Part 1” any less important, or less stunning.

Runners-up: “Tapestry,” “Frame Of Mind,” “Ship In A Bottle”

Grade for the season: B+

Next week: Before we jump into the seventh and final (sniff) season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, we take a look at the *TNG* crew’s second, and best, cinematic outing, *Star Trek: First Contact*.

[Star Trek: First Contact](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[9/08/11 10:00AM](#)

The second *Trek* movie starring the *TNG* crew, and their first feature without any hand-holding from original series vets, *First Contact* has quite a lot in common with the *other* second *Trek* movie, *Wrath Of Khan*. Both films are sequels to financially successful but critically lukewarm predecessor; both films use *Moby Dick* as a thematic touchstone; and both films feature villains that first appeared on the respective television shows of each crew. Khan debuted in [“Space Seed,”](#) the Borg in [“Q Who?”](#), the big difference (at least structurally) being that Khan was only featured once. By the time *First Contact* hit theaters, the Borg had become a seasonal regular on *TNG*, and where *Wrath* effectively cemented Khan’s place in *Trek* lore, *First Contact* merely delivered on the inevitable. The only other non-ensemble character who would be as likely to appear when *TNG* made its transition to the big screen is Q, and he already gets to do a fair bit in the series’ 90-minute-long finale. It’s not particularly surprising that the Borg would make the jump to cinema, but, despite a few episodes that watered down their initial impact, they aren’t unwelcome, either. Which is a good part of the reason behind the fourth connection between *Wrath* and *Contact*: Both movies are well-regarded, and considered by some as high-water marks for their respective series. I’ll agree with the second part. Somebody could make a case that *TNG* made a better movie than *FC*, but I’m not sure what, exactly, that movie would be—maybe *Nemesis*? Regardless, it wouldn’t be an easy case to make, and whatever its faults, *FC* is at least a competent, well-paced sci-fi adventure, one that *feels* like a movie more than *Generations* ever did. There’s no embarrassing subplots à la Data and his emotion chip, and while there are a few plotheoles to poke sticks at, there’s none of the aimless, “Why the hell are we here?” wandering of *Generations* that made poking plotheoles so inviting. I’ve got criticisms to make, and I don’t think *FC* is anywhere equal to *Wrath*—in terms of iconic power, character development, or story—but I really don’t think this is a bad film, and it certainly

shouldn't be expected to stand up next to (in my mind) one of the all-time best genre pictures. It's more that, well, *FC* really is the best *TNG* movie, and that's good *and* bad. To the good, it could've been worse. But to the bad—well, this crew deserved better than what is, essentially, a consequence-free zone.

Hey, remember how Picard used to be one of the Borg? And remember how, after some time with his family and, presumably, a fair bit of therapy, he mostly got over it? Well, forget that last part. Picard's back to having nightmares about the Borg, and while those nightmares aren't great for his mental health, they're also a warning sign that the Borg are on the move. One of *FC*'s greatest assets is its speed—we're barely into the movie before Picard gets word that the Borg are making a big push against the Federation, and once the threat's established, it never lets up until the maybe 10 minutes before the end credits, if that. There's no slow easing in, no tedious, overly adoring shots to introduce to the new *Enterprise*. The new ship does look cool—Troi even gets a desk and a computer all to herself on the new bridge—but it's all introduced with impressive, clean efficiency. That's basically what Jonathan Frakes does best as a director: he's no innovator, but if you give him a competent script, he'll make it tick like it's supposed to.

After informing Picard that the Borg are on the move, Starfleet orders the captain to take his *Enterprise* and go patrol the Neutral Zone in case the Romulans decide to take advantage of the situation. At least, that's the reason the admiral gives Picard, but Jean-Luc knows the truth: Starfleet doesn't trust him to face the Borg because of his earlier assimilation. At first, Picard goes along with the orders, but when word comes back that the Borg cube is making its final assault on Earth, and the fight is not going well for the Federation, Picard changes his mind and sends the *Enterprise* toward home, to do its part in the fight. They arrive just in time to save Worf and the surviving crew of the *Defiant* before that ship is destroyed (Wasn't Tom Riker supposed to be on board? If so, we never see him). The cube is on its last legs, and moments after the *Enterprise* joins the attack, the Borg make their final, desperate stand, ejecting a sort of giant escape pod at Earth and making a time vortex as they go. The *Enterprise* follows, and because they are flying through the temporal wake left by the Borg ship, in the moments before they follow that pod through the hole in time, they see Earth's civilization instantly assimilated. The Borg have gone back into the past and changed history for the worse. And now our heroes are the only ones left who can stop them.

Like I said, the pacing here is terrific. And it has to be, because the minute you start to slow down and think about everything that's happening, the story starts to fall apart. Like: The Borg have a time machine... and this the first time they've used it? And they chose to use it as a last ditch effort, and they pick *this* point in Earth's history to return to? I can think of possible explanations: For the latter question, maybe this is the earliest point in the past where humans would be completely vulnerable to Borg attack and still far enough along in their development to be valuable for assimilation purposes. Or maybe this is the furthest back the Borg can go without risking significant damage to their own timeline. And I suppose you could say that the reason they only pull this stunt as a last resort is that they're uncertain of its chances of success. We also don't know exactly how their method of time displacement works; maybe they have to be near Earth to travel back in time, for some reason. This is always the problem with time-travel stories, much as I love them—the broader the scope, the more questions are raised, and the harder it becomes to answer any of them satisfactorily. Neither of these potential plotheoles is movie-killing, but it does suggest a certain lack of foresight on the part of the filmmakers. Stories don't have to be airtight to work, but *TNG* always works best when it thinks everything through. *First Contact* is, by and large, not much concerned with thinking.

By the time it reaches the halfway mark, *FC* has split its action between Picard, Data, Beverly, and Worf on the *Enterprise*, fighting off an invading Borg presence; and Riker, Troi, and Geordi on the Earth below, working to make sure the Borg's attempts at historical sabotage go awry. More time is spent with the former than the latter, so we'll get the Zefram Cochrane stuff out of the way first. James Cromwell returns to the *Trek* franchise to play Cochrane, a drunken, bitter sumbitch who just happens to be the man who built the first warp-speed engine. The

Borg came back in time to prevent Cochrane's first successful warp flight—that flight not only makes the stars open to humanity, it also attracts the attention of some Vulcans, and leads to the meeting that gives the movie its title. The Borg's initial attack on Cochrane's settlement damages his ship, but doesn't kill him, leaving Riker and the others the task of first finding the man, then telling him his place in the history books and providing every possible assistance in making sure the flight happens on schedule. Again, I've got some questions—like, why the Borg, when they were beaming people aboard the *Enterprise*, didn't beam anybody down to the planet. Or just how the hell a populace splintered into factions by a third world war is going to be able to deal with aliens from outer space without totally losing their shit. But, while not everything here works (Troi's drunk scene is... something), *FC* does get a decent amount of mileage out of Zefram as a reluctant hero, unable to handle the pressure of being the savior of the human race. There's not a lot of depth in Zefram as written, but Cromwell makes the most of the part, and what works especially well is that there's no grand inspiring moment when the character realizes his potential and decides to be a hero. It's more that Riker, in effect, tells him "Get on that damn ship, or we'll *make* you get on that ship," and Zefram goes with the flow of fate. I also like how little anyone worries about screwing with the past—sure, the whole movie is predicated on the importance of maintaining the original timeline, and various characters mention how they need to keep a low profile, but Riker and Geordi both ride along with Zefram on his first trip. There's an appealing practicality to that; they have a job—to make sure everything happens as it should—and they're going to do that job, and not sweat the small stuff.

So that leaves us with Picard and Data (and Beverly and Worf) on the *Enterprise*, battling against the Borg and the Borg Queen. Oh, and Alfre Woodard, a friend of Zefram who gets stuck on the *Enterprise* after Beverly has her beamed to sick bay to treat her for radiation poisoning. These sections are, unsurprisingly, the real meat of the film; the scenes back on the ground serve their purpose, but the real draw of the movie is the Borg on the big screen, and, of course, Patrick Stewart doing his thing. The action sequences here are some of the best of the franchise, as Borg slowly take over the ship, conquering decks and assimilating crew-members with their usual blank-faced aplomb. I've heard *First Contact* described as the *Star Trek* zombie movie, and that's not too far off. If anything, the film could've used more scenes of Picard slowly realizing just how screwed they all are. Like everything else in the movie, the Borg plot moves too fast to really lock down any but the most obvious details and mood, but it does spare some time for a great horror movie setup: Geordi mentions off-handedly to his engineering crew that there's something wrong with the temperature controls, a couple crewmembers investigate, they die, and then everything goes to hell. If you'll indulge me for a moment, I can't help but imagine how cool this movie might have been if it had thrown over the time-travel element entirely—if the *Enterprise* just stumbled over a Borg ship in the middle of nowhere, got in a big fight, thought they had won, and then had to fight the bastards off from inside. Sure, it's a kind of story that's been done before, but so has just about every major plot element of the movie we *did* get, so let me have my dreams.

The Borg stuff is... decent. It fulfills expectations, without ever exceeding them. The Borg's Borg-ification of the *Enterprise* is basically a technological version of the alien infestation in *Aliens*: they cover the ship's corridors with black tendrils and circuitry, they steal familiar faces and impregnate them with the cybernetic impulse, and, yes, they even have a Queen living in the heart of everything. Alice Krige does creepy very well, but I've always thought the Queen was a silly idea, and re-watching *FC* for this review didn't change my mind. Yes, you can say she's justifiable because she's not a singular identity, but rather an expression of the collective's conscious will—but she's still slinking around trying to seduce Data and Picard, using the same language of sex and implied promise that every femme fatale has used since the dawn of men being nervous about women's sexuality. Outside of Krige's efforts, there's nothing really distinctive about the character, and no real reason for her to exist, apart from giving the writers an easier job of getting dialogue into the climax. Justify her existence however you like, but the simple fact is, what makes the Borg scary is their lack of personality. They are computer programs put into flesh, the ultimate

expression of technology's implacable will pitted against our weak and mortal identity. Once they start having personalities (and the Queen has a very definite personality), they stop being the Borg.

What really bothers me about this storyline, though, is what it does to Picard. While Data's enduring the temptations of a kind of gross looking slice of human flesh (and since when were the Borg *sensual* creatures? How does that make sense with anything else we know about them?), Picard's engaging in increasingly desperate efforts to block the Borg from dominating the entire ship. We get a silly but sorta fun scene where he uses the holodeck (with a reference to ["The Big Goodbye"](#)) to kill a couple of drones, a nicely suspenseful sequence centered outside the ship as the Borg attempt to use the *Enterprise*'s deflector ray and then Picard snaps, insults Worf, and has to get lectured by the guest star on just why he's being a dick. Stewart sells it, of course. He sells the hell out of it. He even manages to make the psychic link Picard apparently has with the Borg seem more ominous than silly. But how does any of this make sense? Picard had his chance to go off the rails when he dealt with Hugh back in ["I, Borg,"](#) and he didn't. Unless something substantially awful happens to unhinge him in "Descent, Part II," for all intents and purposes, his major issues with the Borg are pretty well-resolved. Oh sure, he probably has the occasional bad dream, but this movie acts as his experience in ["Best Of Both Worlds"](#) is still raw to him, still gnawing at him after so many years, and that does a serious disservice to all his experiences since that incident.

But all right, let's accept that it's worth fudging a few details to give Stewart something meaty to work with. That doesn't change the fact that the events of the movie seem to bear out to a certain extent Starfleet's unwillingness to allow Picard to engage with the Borg directly, which is a strange choice for the movie to make. What's worse, though, is that once again maybe the best captain the franchise ever had doesn't get a chance to be a hero. That could sound silly, but Kirk never had to put up with this crap. In every single *TOS* movie outside the last, Kirk is pure, undiluted good guy, and the only lesson he ever needs to learn is that he belongs on the bridge of the *Enterprise*, or that he's not as old as he thought he was. In the last movie, yeah, he realizes maybe he shouldn't be quite so racist, which is roughly akin to the arc Picard has here (Picard doesn't decide to parlay with the Borg or anything, but he does realize that his prejudices are driving his behavior to an unnatural degree). Only Kirk makes that journey on his own merits, and he doesn't need someone we've never met before shouting at him to grow up. Besides, that's the *last* of the *TOS* movies. Would it be all that much to ask to give Picard a whole movie that doesn't show him as weak or crazed? I like complex heroes, I really do, but the complexity here is so lazy and unnecessary. The movie would be just as good if Picard never decided he was going full-Ahab. There's no lesson to be learned from his revelation, no greater thematic purpose. It's just to give Woodard a little more reason to be in the cast, and to give Stewart some speeches to shout. (Which he does very well. "The line must be drawn HERE" is one the movie's few really memorable speeches; it's a shame that the whole point of the speech is that he's briefly gone 'round the bend.) Like so much else in the movie, on the surface, it looks fine, but there's nothing connecting Picard's drama to anyone else's.

The other big problem with *First Contact* is one that's more endemic of the *TNG* movie franchise as a whole. The subplots here are stronger than in *Generations*, but once again, we have too many characters struggling to make a mark in too little screen time. This, I think, was always going to be the central difficulty of bringing the *TNG* ensemble to the screen: There are too damn many of them, and unlike a TV show, you can't focus on, say, Geordi this week and Beverly the next. It doesn't help that most of the leads spend the film in different places, and that their stories so rarely intersect. *First Contact* does as well as can be expected, and it does hold together, better than it has any real right too. It's a solid double, and if this was an episode of the TV show, a solid double would be nothing to be ashamed of. The problem, really, is that there are only four *TNG* movies; and since this is the only one that ever gets on base, I can't help but always be disappointed that it never tried for home plate.

Stray observations:

- Woodard does get some good lines: “Borg? Sounds Swedish.” Then, later: “Definitely not Swedish!” (Also, “You broke your little ships.”)
- Aww, Hawk. I suppose calling him “Goose” would’ve been just a little too obvious.
- Only one reference to Data’s emotion chip, and it leads to another one of the movie’s best lines. Data turns the chip off when he starts to fear the Borg, and Picard tells him, “Data, there are times that I envy you.”
- Worf has to endure being the butt of a few jokes, but he gets some of the most metal moments in the whole movie, which is nice.
- Oh hey, Robert Picardo!
- I’m not a fan of Data’s big action-movie one-liner (“Resistance... is futile.”), but I do like his confession to Picard that he was briefly tempted by the Queen’s offer—for less than a second. “For an android, that is almost an eternity.”

Next week: We enter the seventh and final (sniff) season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* with “Descent: Part II” and “Liasons.”

SEASON SEVEN

Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Descent: Part 2”/“Liasons.”



[Zack Handlen](#)

[9/15/11 10:00AM](#)

“Descent: Part 2” (first aired 9/18/93)

Or The One Where Data Is His Brother’s Keeper

Here we are with the seventh season premiere of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and the final season premiere for the entire run of the show—and, well, it’s not looking quite as solid as I’d like, really. We’ve got two of the series most familiar villains, who respectively serve as polar opposite representations of humans’ inherent fear of technology: the Borg, as the impersonal machine that renders all our individuality moot; and Lore, as unchecked aggression with inhuman strength and persistence. And bridging the gap between those two we’ve got Data, the fan-favorite android whose benevolent quest to be a real live boy has been seemingly perverted into rage for his former friends on the *Enterprise*. Picard, Troi, and Geordi have been taken captive by Lore and his followers, while Beverly’s captaining the *Enterprise* and Riker and Worf are running into Hugh, the individualized Borg drone who (through no fault of his own) started this whole mess. It’s a very busy episode, no doubt about it, and it has a few exciting moments; Captain Crusher’s attempts to out-manuever the Borg ship have the hallmarks of a good *TNG* episode, with smart people making risky choices, and it’s fun to have all that “metaphasic shielding” stuff from [“Suspicious”](#) pay off in an unexpected context.

So why don’t I love this? My knee-jerk response is to say that “Descent: Part 2,” even more than [“Part 1,”](#) doesn’t really feel like *TNG*, but I’ve used that criticism before, and it’s not a particularly effective one. It doesn’t say anything specific. So digging deeper, I’d say the failing of this episode, and of the two-parter as a whole, is that it doesn’t go much beyond the obvious. The biggest idea the writers had on this one was “Lore takes advantage of the

Borg,” and while that’s not a bad idea at all (and a fairly clever way to bring Lore back, really), “Descent” never goes beyond it, not really. Apart from Hugh, the Borg are little more than mobile props—there are occasional nods to the turmoil they must be experiencing after being severed from the Collective, but once the episode has established that Lore is the real threat, the Borg operate like any other manipulated race. They listen to the master, they obey, right up until it becomes dramatically effective for them to stop obeying, at which point they start fighting amongst themselves. They used to be the show’s boogeymen, but here, they are presented almost entirely as victims. In a better episode, this could’ve been effective. We could’ve gotten into the ethics of the situation: In a way, Lore is more evil than the Borg because he actually recognizes that his behavior causes harm, whereas the Borg simply see themselves as obeying a natural, and ultimately beneficial, prerogative. But even Lore was programmed, which makes you wonder how much to blame for all of this he really is—or, at least, that’s what I would have wondered, if the episode had any interest in that sort of question.

Instead, we get what is a half-hearted deflation of a potentially devastating threat, and a betrayal of one of *TNG*’s most consistently compelling characters. This is an episode that can only survive if you don’t think about it, if you spend most of the running time taking the most shallow possible interpretation of events. And that’s a problem, because this show has trained us by now to always think things through. “Descent” is far from *TNG*’s worst episode, and it’s easy to be moderately entertained while watching it, but for all its seemingly epic scope, it’s essentially hollow, raising big issues only to drop them without much consideration.

So, it turns out I was basically dead on when I guessed that Lore was using some sort of emotion emitter to manipulate the Borg and Data—and I don’t mention this to brag (Haha—I correctly predicted the plot of a show that aired almost 20 years ago), but because... okay, I did sort of mention it to brag. But come on, how weak is this? Lore is using the emotion chip he stole in [“Brothers”](#) to send a carrier wave that overwhelms artificial life forms with feelings they can’t understand, making them vulnerable to his machinations. At least, I think he has to be using this chip on the Borg as well as Data, since we definitely see angry Borg or worried Borg at various points throughout the episode. Plus, Data caught the wave during the Borg encounter that started this whole mess. But we never see Lore actively controlling how much “feeling” the Borg get, like we see him doing for Data. Does he have it set to some kind of low-level aggression? Does he only activate it when he needs the group to attack? And none of the Borg we see are addicted to emotion like Data clearly is. Lore’s control over the group is shaky at best, given how easily Hugh is able to infiltrate them and then throw everyone into a riot when the narrative requires an easy resolution. In concept, Lore taking over as leader of a small group of Borg who’ve been thrown into confusion by Hugh’s individuality makes sense; Lore is one of the only other artificial life forms around, and he’s comfortable with being his own man (so to speak). But how did Lore find the rogue Borg? And why haven’t other Borg tracked down these rebels and eliminated them? Surely this dissolution would be a greater threat to the Collective than, well, just about anything. At times, it feels like we’ve jumped into a story past the most interesting part, and while I realize there’s no way that *TNG* in its current form could’ve shown us Lore and the rogue Borg’s initial connection, the episode could’ve been substantially improved if it gave off the impression that anyone had given any thought at all to the back-story.

Then there’s poor Data. Last episode had him confronting the fact that not all emotions are easy to handle—this one has him as a brainwashed junkie willing to betray his closest friends and the entire human race for a quick fix of... pleasure, I guess? I dunno. Look, there are ways this *could* have worked. (I’m beginning to sense a theme here.) Data’s quest for humanity has been arguably the most persistent character objective in the run of the series, and it’s led to some great episodes. And even the episodes that weren’t great were interesting, primarily because Data is at once instantly likeable and utterly alien. He is polite, non-confrontational, never takes offense or gets angry, and, because of his inability to consistently comprehend the behavior of even his closet friends, he’s set slightly apart from the rest of normal society—something which just about everyone can relate to. But he’s also a machine, and

invulnerable to the weaknesses and indiscretions that plague seemingly every other sentient being on the show. He mimics empathy, but is incapable of experiencing it; his mercy is the mercy of subroutines, logic, and facts. Which, up until now, has served him and his co-workers very well, but what if he finally got what he thought he wanted—what would happen next? Imagine an adult whose spent his entire life emotion-free suddenly waking up lustful, sad, impassioned and delighted all at the same time. It would render him, at least for the moment, incapable of making rational decisions, because he would have no frame of reference for what “rational” meant in this new context. Data’s in roughly the same position, he’s been fixed his whole existence to strive for emotion. So how do his priorities shift once the new emotion hits? We saw he was willing to risk the lives of two of his closest friends for the sake of a sentient vacuum cleaner last season. Who knows what he’d risk if his goal was in sight.

That’s not really what we get, though. We get brainwashed Data, who needs to be reminded of his friends and separated from the tech that’s making him be all evil and stuff. There’s no subtlety in Data’s performance in “Part 2.” He sneers at Picard, Troi, and Geordi like a second-rate hoodlum, and we never get a sense of him transitioning from the generally normal Data of the first part of this story to the willing-to-torture-Geordi Data we see here. The only real way to read this is that everything that happens once Data escaped the *Enterprise* with Croxis happened because Data was under Lore’s control. Despite the conversations with Troi last time about “negative” emotions (which, frustratingly, gets raised again here and then immediately dropped; does that mean Troi was wrong, and there *are* negative emotions, not just negative actions? Because it certainly doesn’t seem like Data has a choice in his actions), this has nothing to do with Data’s quest, nothing to do with him becoming more human. If it did, I doubt Picard and the others would be so comfortable at letting the android off the hook after everything that happens. The final scene of the episode has Data nearly destroying the emotion chip, because it made him do things he’s not proud of. Then Geordi stops him and has him put it aside until he’s ready to use it, or something. How does that work? When will Data know he’s ready to install a chip that, earlier, made him turn traitor and engage in a campaign, however briefly, to destroy all non-artificial intelligent life? This could’ve been a profound, even tragic moment, but given how muddled and lazy his episode arc is, feels like too little, too late.

Again, this isn’t terrible. I enjoyed Beverly kicking ass and taking names on the bridge of the *Enterprise*, although I’m not sure how necessary it was; the problem with big two-parters like this is that writers assume they need to shoehorn storylines for every character, and that means that the most compelling parts of the story (here, the Borg/Lore problem and how that relates to Hugh) have to share time with not necessarily awful but still less than essential threads. Worf and Riker seem to get forgotten for large chunks of the episode—they run into another group of rogue Borg on the planet, they meet up with Hugh again and find out he’s less than happy with the role the *Enterprise* played in his life, and they disappear until the last 15 minutes or so, when they convince Hugh to help them get into the compound, just in time for Hugh to stop Lore from shooting Data. I’m not sure why Hugh would be all that compelled to save Data; they didn’t hang out much at all during “[I, Borg](#)” (Hugh’s closest relationship there was with Geordi, who’s off busy being unconscious during the climax), but I guess it’s just assumed that, hey, he’s a nice guy and everything, why not. Then we get a great scene in which Picard installs Hugh as the ruler of his band of merry, murdering Borg, and the heroes ride off into the sunset with the pleasure of a job well done. So while it’s not terrible, it doesn’t really hold up. This is the last we see of Lore, a character who was always more interesting in concept than practice, and it’s the last we see of the Borg on this show, and neither goodbye is particularly satisfying.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- Fact I learned thanks to [Memory Alpha](#): the actor who plays Lieutenant Barnaby here (James Horan) also played Jo'Bril, the possum-playing villain of "Suspicious." The actor really nails both sides of the multiphasic shielding debate.
- This was my week to be haunted by Benito Martinez, an actor best known as for his role as Captain Aceveda on *The Shield*. He plays Salazar, the transporter tech, here; he showed up in last week's *Torchwood* finale; and he popped up on the latest episode of *Sons Of Anarchy*.
- Next time someone pisses you off, point your cell phone at them and say, "I am ready to irradiate your existing brain cells."

"Liasons" (first aired: 9/25/93)

Or The One Where Picard Gets Lucky By Not Getting Lucky

I wonder if the *Enterprise* has a special alert category for ambassador missions. Like, they couldn't go to Red Alert, because even the most oblivious alien might wonder about the constantly flashing red lights, but surely they need to make sure everyone on board is on their toes when some strange outsider beams aboard, brimming over with baffling customs and, potentially, horrifying new smells. Episodes with ambassadors nearly always mean bad news (I mean more for the characters than for the audience, although we've also had to endure our share of suffering), but that stands to reason when you think about it. I mean, sure, given the nature of storytelling, it wouldn't make much sense to show us the times the *Enterprise* had, say, a Sornag from Untonia on board without any incident, but it also fits for less metatextual reasons. An ambassador mission is essentially an attempt between two cultures to negotiate some common understanding. Tensions are high even during the most seemingly benign encounters, and the two groups, no matter how well meaning, don't even have the comfort of a shared humanity to fall back on.

"Liasons" is another ambassador episode (I feel like I should've put more effort into establishing a category for these), and yes, Troi is involved. And yes, there is some unsettling sexual politicking, but thankfully, Deanna isn't involved there; the worst she has to deal with here is an upset stomach. The *Enterprise* is doing a cultural exchange with the Iyaarans, a somewhat mysterious race that nobody knows much about. Two Iyaaran ambassadors are going to stay on the ship, while Picard is set to travel to the Iyaaran homeworld. The initial meeting seems to go well, as one of the Iyaarans, Loquel, immediately takes to Deanna, but when Picard tries to partner the other Iyaaran, Byleth, with Riker, Byleth refuses and demands to work with Worf. Which is odd, to say the least, and Byleth's cold, arrogant attitude doesn't bode well for Worf's peace of mind, but the Klingon accepts the burden readily enough. Then Picard gets on the shuttle with a third Iyaaran, Voval, and heads off.

What follows are two different stories, albeit ones that ultimately stem from the same source. While Worf deals with an inexplicably hostile Byleth, and Troi handles Loquel's developing obsession with sweets and desserts, Picard and Voval run into their own problems. Something goes wrong with the shuttle, and Voval is forced to make an emergency landing on an apparently unknown planet. When Voval is injured in the crash, Picard goes out looking for help, and gets zapped by a plasma field. When he comes to, he's in a downed freighter, his wounds have been seen to and a young woman is tending to a fire. Her name is Anna, she's been trapped on the planet by herself for seven years and she has a few issues. Those issues aren't immediately obvious, but Anna is clearly very, very lonely, right from the start. And Picard is a patient, polite, and reassuring—more importantly, he is literally the only game in town. So she starts getting attached, and when Picard doesn't immediately reject that attachment outright, that attachment becomes something more intense and more dangerous. She tells him she loves him. She locks him in the freighter when she goes out for supplies. She kisses him. And when he finally tells her he isn't interested, she threatens to throw herself off a cliff.

All of this is unsettling and more than a little sad, but because this is *TNG*, we need to have some sort of science-fiction twist at the end of tie everything up. (I'm trying to imagine this episode with just Picard and Anna, and I'm not sure it would really work. Say she really was just a mixed up mental case—would we get something like [“The Perfect Mate”](#)? Or would it just be flat out boring?) Early after rescuing Picard, Anna tells him that Voval died of his injuries, but, given that we never see the body, and that we already are suspecting Anna has her reasons for wanting to keep Picard to herself, it's no huge surprise when Voval turns up later in the episode. But Picard realizes something is up, and the next time he sees Anna, while she's standing on the edge of a chasm, threatening to jump to her doom if he doesn't tell her he loves her, he calls her bluff. So Anna pushes a button and turns into Voval, and Picard becomes very, very glad that his relationship with the young woman never got beyond awkward kissing stage.

The twist: Voval isn't just a shuttle pilot, he's the third ambassador, and along with Loquel and Byleth, he was sent to explore one specific aspect of human culture. Loquel was to investigate pleasure, hence the constant ingestion of delicious food; Byleth was sent to study aggression, so he picks the most aggressive crewmember on the ship and, eventually, forces him into a physical confrontation; and Voval was sent to study love. This all came about because the Iyaarans had been the to the planet Voval and Picard were on before, and had found the diaries of the *real* Anna, which told the story of how she'd nursed someone to health, and how they'd fallen in love, and, well, the Iyaarans are very calm and reasonable and they just don't understand any of this. So they decided to experiment, and here we are.

The problem with an episode like this is that it tries to take on Big Questions in a very self-conscious way, and that self-consciousness winds up making everyone involved look kind of silly. Like, when I think of “pleasure,” eating chocolate isn't the first thing that comes to mind (or even the 10th), and Loquel's investigations seems pretty short-sighted. Or the fact that once again, we have an alien race with no real personality (apart from a blind disregard for others' feelings, but since they don't have feelings of their own, how can they expect to realize what they're doing may be hurtful?) who exists primarily to reflect information back on the heroes, not particularly compelling information at that. The story is, basically, a long, drawn-out build to a punchline that renders all the drama irrelevant. Which is fine in the case of, say, Troi and Worf, since their stories are played for laughs, but all those weird, tense conversations between Anna and Picard were interesting largely because of the potential consequences that hung behind every word. But since Anna is a construct created for an experiment—an experiment which falls because it's difficult to pull off a full Stockholm Syndrome with someone with Picard's sense of self in less than a week—who cares? Although I am curious as to how far Voval was willing to go with the experiment. What if Picard really had fallen for Anna? What if they'd gotten to the point where intercourse was the next logical step? I'm guessing if Voval's experiment *had* worked, Picard would've been a lot less likely to forgive and forget at the end of it. But then again, given that the whole point was for each Iyaaran to experience the emotion in question for themselves, maybe Voval wouldn't have been willing to let go either. That could've made for a more interesting episode. At least then, something would've been at stake.

It's telling when I end up with a review that's over a third plot-summary, because that means I don't have much to say about what I just watched, for good or for bad. This one kinda feels like a half-hour show drawn out to an hour, without much reason for the expansion.

Grade: B-

Stray Observations:

- A double “B-” week. This does not bode well for the rest of the season.

- I would watch a show that was just Worf and Data hanging out. “Byleth is demanding, temperamental, and rude.” “You share all of those qualities.”
- “And if you were not an ambassador, I would disembowel you right here!”

Next week: We achieve “Interface” and start another (sigh) two-parter with “Gambit: Part 1.”

Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Interface”/“Gambit, Part 1”



[Zack Handlen](#)

[9/22/11 10:00AM](#)

“Interface” (season 7, episode 3; originally aired Oct. 2, 1993)

Or The One Where Geordi Puts On A Cyber-Gimp Suit and Talks With His Mother

I got excited seeing Ben Vereen’s name in the opening credits for “Interface.” Vereen is a terrific actor—a little crazed if he doesn’t have strong direction, but brilliantly talented and unique—and I was curious to see what kind of energy he’d bring to the show. I was even more interested when I realized Vereen was going to be playing Geordi’s dad. The story was, in part, driven by Geordi’s concerns over his missing mother, and maybe there was going to be some estrangement or difficulty between him and Vereen that the two would have to overcome together to deal with the disappearance. Maybe halfway through the episode, Geordi talks with his dad via Future Skype. It’s a bit awkward, as La Forge Sr. has already given Mom up for dead, and Geordi isn’t ready to let go. Not a terrible scene, but there isn’t much to it; and that’s the only appearance Vereen makes. In fact, it’s his only appearance (so far as I can tell) in the entire franchise. I suppose he might not be quite as big a star to the rest of the world as he is to me (although surely everyone has seen him in *All That Jazz?*), but it seems like a waste. Much like everything else about this episode.

We’re into season seven now, no turning back. That’s over twice the number of seasons as the [original *Trek*](#), and the stretch marks are starting to show. Seven seasons is an impressive number for any series, and however bad this end run gets, I’m going to leave *TNG* with a favorable impression on the whole. But man, if “Interface” is the mean for what’s to come, I’m not looking forward to the next couple of months. This was by turns boring, poorly constructed, and frustrating, a hodgepodge of half-considered ideas tossed together in an ill-advised hope that they might add up

to more than the sum of their parts. It takes on a major issue—the potential loss of Geordi’s mom—and thoroughly bungles the delivery, treating behavior which in any other episode would be rewarded (i.e. Geordi’s refusal to believe that his mom is gone for good) as unstable, and throwing some magical aliens into the mix just to make everything worse. We’re not quite in the dregs of the first season here, as the episode isn’t badly acted, and characters behave roughly as they usually do, but man. This was a whole lot of not good.

To begin with, the level of coincidence required to make the story possible is a bit of a stretch. Geordi, Beverly, and Data are testing out a new virtual reality-esque interface, via which Geordi can physically control a probe from a distance, allowing him to study close-hand problems that would be otherwise fatal to human beings. (I thought this is what Data was for?) The *Enterprise* is on its way to check out what happened to the *Raman*, a science vessel currently trapped in the atmosphere of a gas giant, and Geordi plans to use the probe-suit to investigate the ship as directly as they can. It’s a little odd that, after so many years and God knows how many rescue missions, we get a mission that requires the use of a specific technology, and it just happens to be the episode that specific technology is first introduced, but it’s not like the show hasn’t played that card before. What really doesn’t work is that just as the *Enterprise* enters orbit around the gas giant, the word comes down that Geordi’s mother’s ship, the *Hera*, has vanished. Silva La Forge’s disappearance is what creates much of “Interface”’s dramatic tension, and it’s what ultimately puts Geordi in serious danger, when an alien race assumes the form of Geordi’s mom to try and get him to let them go. The heightened emotions of the situation make the interface process a highly unstable one—which means it’s awfully convenient for the episode that Geordi just happens to be hit with a crisis. And such a specific sort of crisis, too. His mom isn’t “dead,” she’s “vanished,” a plot hook that could have easily served as the foundation of an episode on its own.

And that’s another problem with this episode—the handling of Silva’s disappearance is unusual, and while it’s possible to view that unusual quality as a sign of the writers trying to take risks, it plays instead as sloppy storytelling. The *Hera* vanishes, and seemingly within hours, everyone is telling Geordi he needs to accept that she’s gone for good. There’s nothing wrong with drama that deals with the difficulties of overcoming grief, but the balance here is all wrong. Until “Silva” shows up on the *Raman*, Geordi seems like the sane one, and there’s something almost suspicious in the ease with which everyone—including the afore mentioned Vereen—is willing to let go. We’ve been trained by decades of sci-fi, horror, and fantasy stories on the principle that no body means no death, and while there’s a tale to tell that uses that need for closure to good purpose, “Interface” is not that story. Geordi’s grief and confusion are really just a means to an end, which makes his emotional responses throughout seem less a natural response to his situation, and more something that has been dictated by the needs of the story. That does a disservice to the character, and makes it difficult, if not impossible, to really care about anything that happens here. At the end of the hour, Geordi says that his experience with the magic shape-shifting aliens has allowed him to find closure regarding his mom’s probable death. Which is nice for him, but there’s no closure or catharsis for us, no transition from “Wait, her entire ship vanished? Leaving no trace? Okay, *something* has to be up with that,” to “Aww, she’s space vapor.” As far as I can tell, the issue is never resolved, and it’s not some sort of “[Pine Barrens](#)”-esque commentary on the essential mystery of life. It’s basically just half-assed. (If I had to guess, I’d say Silva’s hotshot engineer pulled something that destroyed the ship, but what’s bizarre is the cavalier attitude everyone has towards a vanished-without-a-trace starship. Any other time this happened, the *Enterprise* would be investigating. Here, it’s treated like this sort of thing happens every week.)

Then there’s the aliens. When Geordi uses the probe-suit to project his mind on-board the *Raman*, he finds a damaged ship full of corpses—and then Silva shows up. She tells Geordi he needs to bring the *Raman* down to the surface of the planet somehow, claiming that the *Hera* is down there, and Geordi believes her. He spends most of the episode believing her, and doing his best to explain to everyone else how her ship could’ve somehow teleported itself onto a planet where the atmospheric pressure would easily be enough to crush its hull. At least in these

conversations, Geordi comes across as actually off-kilter, as opposed to the other points in the episode where we're simply *told* he's being unreasonable. It's silly, and it's the sort of silly that could've maybe worked if they put a little more effort into making it work. All you'd have to do is make "Silva"'s story just a little more plausible. Like, have her claim her crew is trapped on the gas planet instead of saying her whole ship. Sure, the idea is that the alien pretending to be Silva is just pulling things off the surface of Geordi's mind, and that Geordi is so desperate for some sign of his mom that he'll believe it, but in order for the episode to work, I think we need to be able to believe it too. At least at first. This isn't "Interface"'s worst crime, but it's such a needless one that it's hard to accept.

Turns out, the aliens are the reason everyone on board the *Raman* is dead. Oh, they're nice aliens to be sure, but they tried to communicate with the ship's crew in the same way they communicate with Geordi-in-a-Probe, and that killed 'em. For some reason. Now they're trapped on board the *Raman*, and they're dying, and they need to get back to the planet. So that's enough to give us some conflict—only thing is, that's all we get. These aren't sentient beings, they're a plot device, as nakedly anonymous as they come. Everything about them is convenient to the needs of the episode and nothing else. Which is not a first for *TNG* (or *Trek* in general), but I'd be more willing to accept this if it was in the service of a story that actually earned a level of expedience. Here, we have mind-reading aliens to exploit Geordi's grief, and we have Geordi's grief to make sure the interface with the probe becomes dangerous, and that's as far as it goes. Once you clear away all the interference, there's barely anything left.

There are other complaints. The virtual-reality probe system is pretty ridiculous—I'm not sure why it's necessary for Geordi to be fully immersed in the system, in a body suit and everything (when we see the probe, it's basically a floating trash can), and I certainly don't understand the physics that go into a system that can create physical burns on its users hands simply because he's really feeling it. (Maybe the aliens psychic powers caused it? Sure, let's go with that.) And there is some good here as well, mostly in the interactions between Geordi and Data. It's also great to see Geordi getting reprimanded for his behavior here—he's irresponsible and directly disobeys Picard, and at least this doesn't just get swept under the rug. Still, that doesn't go very far. This is a weak effort, and while it's possible to imagine various elements making for good television, the way they're combined here mostly makes for a tedious, unrewarding hour.

Grade: C+

Stray Observations:

- One positive: The cold open, which starts with Geordi already using the probe (instead of showing us the probe, we see Geordi himself, VISOR-less), is odd and fun.
- Oh, and one more: While Geordi is getting the real story from the alien during the episode's climax, we're watching Picard, Data, and Beverly trying to come up with a way to save Geordi. Which means we only hear Geordi's half of the conversation. It's not a bad way to get the information across without resorting to flat exposition.
- "You may experience the emptiness with me if you wish." Best pick-up line ever?

"Gambit, Part 1" (season 7, episode 4; originally aired Oct. 9, 1993)

Or *The One where Picard And Riker Are Menaced By Richard Lynch's Forehead Bumps*

Oh hey, another two-parter. Joy.

Actually, "Gambit: Part 1" isn't as bad as I was dreading it would be. In fact, once you get past the opening 15 minutes, it turns into a fun, goofy romp along the lines of ["Starship Mine."](#) Only it's a bit better than "Mine," because Data ends up as captain of the *Enterprise*, which hasn't happened in a while. "Gambit" plays a bit like a cheesy '80s sci-fi flick, something Canon might've made in between churning out ninja and Chuck Norris pictures;

the presence of '80s B-movie fixture Richard Lynch as the episode's main villain doesn't alter this impression. It's not amazing or anything, and as always I question the need to spread this out over two episodes. (We'll see how part two works out, though.) But it's less bad than "Interface," and, at least right now, probably better than anything the seventh season has had to offer. I'm slowly coming around to the idea that the thoughtful, challenging stories that *TNG* told in its best moments might be a thing of the past, but if this is what's replacing them, well, there are worse ways to go.

Speaking of "worse," the first act of "Gambit" is something of a slog. The cold open in the space bar, featuring Riker, Worf, Beverly, and Troi trying to find out what happened to Picard, is decent—I especially enjoyed Beverly's kinky beret—but once the crew learns that Picard is dead, things take a turn for the painful. (No, Picard isn't dead. But they think he is.) Really, it's just this one scene, when Troi confronts Riker on his behavior in the wake of Picard's purported demise. It's amazingly bad. Like "high-school students doing a play that somebody in creative writing class wrote after watching ["A," My Name Is Alex"](#)" Full of tortured, overly direct sentences and actors so desperate to justify their dialogue that they overlay everything. It's an unnecessary scene as well; it exists to show how Riker and Troi are dealing with their grief, and how Riker is determined to track down Picard's killers. The latter information is proven redundant when Riker tells a Federation admiral of his intentions (to the episode's credit, we don't waste a lot of time on authority figures arguing against Riker's decision, although I'm fuzzy on exactly what happens to a ship's command when its captain dies), and the former... well, since Picard is, in fact, not dead (Gasp!), this is pointless. It's necessary to indicate that the ensemble has been affected by what happened, but a whole scene about how to properly deal with the tragedy is wasted time when the object of their mourning pops back on screen in the next act. If the Riker-Troi argument had been well-written, if it had been even competently managed, I wouldn't object so much—but this one scene threatens to derail the entire episode.

Which is a shame, really. Once Riker gets himself kidnapped by a group of relic-hunting space pirates, things get a lot more interesting. The bad guys are straight out of the genre playbook, a motley crew of scum and villainy who serve at the pleasure of Arctus Baran (Lynch). And I'm not kidding about the pleasure part; each crewmember has a neural servo implanted in his or her neck, and if they go against Baran's wishes, Baran can transmit great waves of pain with the touch of a button. (Which is somewhat reminiscent of ["Chain Of Command, Part 2."](#)) I was initially worried the episode would lean too heavily on the servos as a way of breaking Riker—torture isn't something this show can do casually anymore—but the devices are more an obstacle that Picard and Riker will eventually have to overcome than anything designed to unsettle us too badly.) Picard's already on board. In an explanation that only just lands within the bounds of plausibility, it turns out that Baran and the others have a special device that allows them to beam people onto their ship by shooting them. Which is why the snitch at the bar thought Picard was dead; instead of being "shot," he'd been transported to Baran's ship. As for how that worked out, well, Picard was doing his archaeology routine, and the space bandits are hopping around the galaxy looking for a very specific relic. Since Picard was off-duty when they found him, he was able to fake his way onto the ship and join up. Now he's processing relics looking for a certain signature that Baran wants (for reasons we don't know quite yet), and Riker shows up to lend a helping hand in bringing the bad guys to justice.

Basically what starts off as an episode with a really big hook (PICARD IS DEAD OH NO) shifts soon enough into a bit of escapism, and is all the better for it. Picard and Riker make a great team, but it's not a pair the show usually throws into action together; usually Riker is off on the away team, and whenever Picard is directly involved with the action, it's because Riker has already been incapacitated or Picard has been separated from the crew. But this is one of the foundational relationships of the show, and while this episode isn't particularly deep, it's great to see captain and first officer making plans and kicking ass and so forth. It's also amusing how readily Picard takes to hating on Riker whenever any other member of the crew is around to hear. (Picard is so committed to this that I briefly worried this was going to turn into a mind-control episode; thankfully, it's just that Jean-Luc is nearly as good an

actor as Patrick Stewart.) Obviously establishing open antagonism against his real-life friend is the easiest way to try and prevent Baran from suspecting anything, but Riker's pained look after Picard belts him one is hilarious.

While all this is going down, Data has become captain of the *Enterprise*, and I'm not gonna lie to you: it's awesome. The main focus of the story is Riker and Picard, but every scene with Data running the ship is gold—it's not showy or particularly dramatic, but he's super efficient, and basically unstoppable. If you've ever seen the original *Trek*, you know that every once in a while, Spock would be in the command seat. Sometimes this didn't work out so well, but by and large, he made a terrific commanding officer, because he was über-competant. Spock made logical, sensible choices, and while that isn't always the source of great drama, it can be very satisfying to watch. Data is basically in the same boat here. Picard and the rest of the organic crew aren't the hormone addled adult-teenagers of *TOS*, but it's refreshing to see a story move forward without being hindered by doubt or bad instincts.

Arguably that takes some suspense out of the cliffhanger that ends the episode. The *Enterprise* catches up with Baran's ship while Picard is doing his best to stop Baran from destroying a science vessel that stands in his way. There's some talk, and Riker sends Data a message to lower their shields. Data considers this, nods, and then obeys the order—which, apparently, allows Baran to fire on the *Enterprise* while it's unprotected. The fact that Riker set this all up, and Data allowed it to happen, means that it's hard to get too worried about anything happening to the *Enterprise* before we watch part two. But then, it's hard to believe that anything would've happened to the ship regardless, and what Data and Riker are working together to accomplish is to create a different kind of suspense. I'm not wondering if the *Enterprise* will survive; I'm wondering *how* it survives. Which, really, is the question at the heart of all cliffhangers. It wouldn't be a cliffhanger if it was going to have an unhappy ending.

I don't really have a lot to say about this one—can't say yet if the two-parter justifies itself, or if the cliffhanger resolution makes sense, or if Baran gets a dramatically satisfying end. I doubt the second part of the episode is going to be amazing television, and I'd guess that, super-sizing aside, “Gambit” isn't going to try for quite as much as “Interface” did. (For all its faults, “Interface” did have a certain kind of ambition.) But it's entertaining, and it makes a lot more sense than “Interface” did, and, that one scene aside, I didn't hate this. I just don't have a whole lot more to comment on, so hopefully that's enough.

Grade: B

Next week: I hopefully find something more compelling to talk about with “Gambit, Part 2,” and hold Data's hand through some bad dreams in “Phantasms.”

Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Gambit, Part 2”/“Phantasms”



[Zack Handlen](#)

[9/29/11 10:00AM](#)

“Gambit, Part 2” (season 7, episode 4; first aired Oct. 16, 1993)

Or The One Where Everyone Empties Their Minds, Although I Think That One Ensign Was Imagining J. Edgar Hoover

I forgot to mention last week: Tarella, the Romulan-who-turns-out-to-be-a-Vulcan hanging with the space pirates, is played by Robin Curtis, who previously replaced Kirstie Alley in the role of Lt. Saavik in [Star Trek III: The Search For Spock](#). This isn't particularly relevant to anything, outside of pointing out the *Trek* franchise's willingness to recycle actors in different roles (something which, while occasionally distracting, is actually pretty cool). While it's supposed to be a surprise that Tarella is a Vulcan, not a Romulan, there's no indication her character has any connection to Saavik, which is for the best. And hell, I wasn't really surprised that Tarella *was* a Vulcan—given her cool, composed behavior through much of both these episodes, I'd just ignored the telltale forehead ridges and assumed she was Vulcan from the start. There's some double crossing at work here, and Curtis is fine in the role, but the main reason I mention her so early in this review is that, well, once again I find myself at something of a loss. I promise I won't spend the rest of this season constantly complaining about having nothing to say, but man. This is... passable. It's moderately entertaining, it has a scene or two I loved, and an ending that was reaching for the profound but was ultimately just very, very silly. Everything else seemed kind of childish.

But I'm paid to blather, not to whine (there is a subtle difference), so let's do this: Remember that cliffhanger? It was, like, a week ago, so you probably should, but to refresh: Under orders from Riker (who's currently hanging out on Baran's ship), Data lowered the *Enterprise's* shields, allowing Picard to fire Baran's ship's phasers on them

unprotected. The bad guys scored two direct hits on one of the *Enterprise*'s nacelles, but we learn this week that the phaser power had already been sufficiently lowered, and the attack did minimal damage. Captain Data responds to this by making his own fake attack on Baran's ship, which allows the space pirates to escape with the impression that they damaged the *Enterprise*, but lack sufficient power to damage it further. As cliffhanger resolutions go, this is... fine. It makes story sense, and while it doesn't keep tension high, let's be honest with ourselves: Tension in this two-parter was never that high to begin with.

The most interesting idea raised in this entire two-parter doesn't hit till roughly halfway through the episode. Tarella, having deduced Picard's true nature through careful observation (she realizes he was the one who lowered the ship's phaser levels and then pretended as though they were too damaged to continue firing), tells him her real name is T'Pol, and she's actually a member of the Vulcan intelligence, sent to infiltrate Baran's group. The relics Baran has been hunting for are pieces of an ancient Vulcan weapon designed to amplify its users' thoughts, which sounds scary enough; back on planet Vulcan, an isolationist movement is growing which believes that the Vulcans need to rid themselves of interference from all other outside influence, and they're willing to pay big money for a weapon they believe will make them the most powerful force in the universe. T'Pol explains that she's trying to figure out exactly who is offering Baran money for the relics, and Picard readily agrees to help, but she warns him: She has to make sure the weapon doesn't fall into the wrong hands, and she's willing to blow up everyone on board just to make sure that doesn't happen.

Only—and here's the twist—T'Pol (or Tarella, or whatever the hell her real name is) is lying. Oh, there's an isolationist on Vulcan, but she's not working to track them down—she's one of them. In fact, she's the only one we ever see, so it's entirely possible that the “group” she tells Picard about is just a product of her deluded, fevered ambition. But I always enjoy some political intrigue in my *Trek*, so it's nice, at least for a while, that the episode pretends to be about more than just a bunch of greedy mercenaries raiding ruins for cash. We haven't heard about much going on at Vulcan for a while now, maybe they're going through a period of hardship, or maybe some people are having bad reactions to the attempts to broker peace with the Romulans. Who knows. Sadly, this episode doesn't really give us much in the way of answers, because the “Vulcan isolationists” plot is just a hook to hang the episode's climax on. T'Pol gets the pieces of the device she needs, she puts them together back on Vulcan, and is able to use the device to kill two members of the space pirate crew. But when she goes to attack Picard, she tells him to pick up his weapon first (sadly, Curtis does not bust out a Jack Palance impersonation here), and Picard is able to quickly deduce the resonator's one weakness: peace.

Thematically, this fits in well with *TNG*'s fundamental assumption that dialogue, mutual respect and tolerance are sufficient to defeat just about any form of violence. This is an optimistic show, and it makes sense that the so-called ultimate weapon would prove insufficient against the force of that optimism. In terms of plot, however, it's a little weak. It's not so much that I object to the weapon ending up as something of a dud; it's a smart way to undercut the rest of the two-parter, and a way to bring the whole story into something more in keeping with *TNG*'s basic philosophy. It's just that, as it plays out here, I don't really buy it. I found myself thinking of gags from *Ghostbusters*, and much as I love *Ghostbusters*, I doubt that's what the writers were going for. When the away team beams down to Vulcan to rescue Picard, the captain quickly warns them that the only way to defeat T'Pol and her machine is to empty their minds of violent thoughts. And somehow, Worf manages to do this, enough to survive a direct shot from the brain gun. I love Worf, but—really? A Klingon who always seems one bad day away from going Keith Moon on quarters, Worf has never struck me as someone capable of calming down—from a position of full alert, mind you—so immediately. It comes across as too easy.

Really, the whole episode is like that, from the resolved cliffhanger to the plotting on-board Baran's ship. Baran actually asks Riker to get closer to “Galen,” (Picard's assumed name) in order to betray him down the line, which allows Riker and Picard to chat at their pleasure without fear of raising suspicion. And Baran's downfall comes

when he uses his pain-control remote on Picard without realizing that Picard has “switched the transponder codes” beforehand. When it’s that easy to accomplish everything, why bother making it a threat in the first place? “Gambit” didn’t need to be brilliantly insightful to work, but it did need suspense, and it seems like every moment in this episode is about reassuring the audience that there’s no real reason to be concerned. The most intense moment in the whole thing comes when Riker learns that T’Pol isn’t actually working for the Vulcan government, because for once, it means that Picard is in danger without anyone able to directly inform him he’s in danger. Only, T’Pol doesn’t take advantage of this edge for a long time, and by then, Picard has taken over as captain of the ship, which means he could’ve hailed the *Enterprise* at any time just to check in, and gotten the information. There’s no danger here at all, and that kills most of the fun.

The best scene in the whole episode has nothing to do with the main plot. In the absence of Riker and Picard, Data has taken command of the *Enterprise*, and he does a fine job of it. But he’s a little too conservative for Worf’s taste, and the Klingon (who is now acting as the ship’s first officer) repeatedly makes sarcastic or disparaging comments about Data’s leadership style. In response, Data takes him aside to Picard’s ready room and, in effect, tells him either to do his damn job, or be replaced. It’s a great exchange, because it takes what we know about the characters—Worf’s impatience, Data’s attention to duty, the friendship between the two—and it exploits that knowledge in a believable, affecting way. For my money, Data’s firm, but regretful, “Mr. Worf, I’m sorry if I have ended our friendship” is more thrilling than anything that happens with Baran or T’Pol or her silly resonator, and Worf’s apology, and his efforts to work with Data later on, are more rewarding than realizing a millennium-old doohickey isn’t quite as powerful as everyone thought it was. All I really got out of either part of “Gambit” (which, I will say, is far from the worst two-parter this show has done) is how much I’d love to watch a show about Captain Data and First Officer Worf exploring the galaxy. And since that won’t be happening any time soon, I’d say we should move on.

Grade: B-

Stray observations:

- Why even bother to introduce the neural device? (The pain-inducing one, I mean.) It doesn’t serve much plot function, apart from making Picard and Riker yell a couple times and making sure Baran gets a just-desserts ending.

“Phantasms” (season 7, episode 5; first aired Oct. 23, 1993)

Or The One Where Data Cuts A Slice Of T’Pol

Every show has a line it can’t cross. Like most simple declarative sentences, that’s something of a simplification, because most shows have a *lot* of lines they can’t cross. In fact, series are defined as much by what they can’t be as by what they are, and as time goes on, the more the former category begins to solidify. In the first season of *TNG* (I know, I don’t like thinking about that anymore than you do, but I’ll try and make this quick), if the series’ creative team had decided to question Data’s programming more, if they’d wanted to make him substantially more ambiguous as well as a potential threat to the crew, they could’ve done that. I’m not sure it would’ve worked artistically, especially given how much that season feels like a lot of flailing with very little forward motion, but it wouldn’t have been violating any promise the show had already made to its audience. The ensemble was still in the process of being defined. Data could’ve had more sinister intentions; Riker could’ve been sent by Starfleet to keep an eye on Picard; Wesley Crusher could’ve been an alien who’d taken the place of Beverly’s real son. Everything was up for grabs.

Now? Not so much. Really, about as far from that as you can imagine, because it's been a few years, and one of *TNG*'s big pulls now is that it tells stories about people we like to think we know. Yes, those people are all made up and don't really exist beyond the illusion of dialogue and costume and performance, but that illusion has been going on for long enough that it feels as close to solid as it ever will. When I sit down to a new episode, I don't know exactly what to expect story-wise, but I do know that Picard and the rest of the ensemble are going to behave in a fashion logically consistent with everything that's come before. If Picard suddenly goes psychotic, well, I'd have a hard time believing it unless I had a really good reason for doing so. And if Data suddenly up and stabs Troi in the lift, I'm going to need enough justification to straighten the Leaning Tower of Pisa. (Too silly? Yeah. I worked on that one for a bit, but... yeah.)

"Phantasms" comes very close to screwing that particular pooch, but while I think it does bend one of the show's defining lines about as far as it can go, the rest of the episode is strong enough that I'm willing to overlook it. Data's dreaming again, only now, for the first time in his life, he's experiencing nightmares. And what nightmares! I'm a sucker for dream imagery (I think I'm one of the only people who really loved the first half of *The Sopranos*' sixth season), and the stuff we see here is top-notch, as deeply creepy as anything we've ever seen on the show before. Nearly everything we see turns out to be directly symbolic of some experience or danger in Data's real life, but where in other shows (or movies) that would make the experience too literal, here, it makes sense. Data is, after all, a machine, running a program, and that program is only able to translate events into dream logic to a certain point. So we get "cellular-peptide cake" as a stand in for actual cellular peptide, and we get 19th-century coal miners as stand-ins for the invisible insects currently devouring every member of the *Enterprise* crew. Which is actually quite creative, come to think of it. Data should be proud.

Most of "Phantasms" revolves around two mysteries, which, as is often the case with such things, turn out to be one mystery. The *Enterprise* has a new warp coil, but whenever Geordi tries to get the thing up and running, it dies almost immediately. Despite his best efforts, he can't figure out the problem, and he's dodging the attentions of a new ensign who has a crush on him. (It's fun to see Geordi on the opposite end of unhealthy obsession, although I'm not sure what this adds to the rest of the episode. Ensign Tyler gets to be moderately helpful once, leading Picard away from Engineering when the captain decides to take a more hands-on approach, and then she disappears. Maybe LeVar Burton just really wanted his character to be a smooth operator for once.) While Geordi sweats over a proverbial cold stove, and Picard makes his apologies for being late to an admiral's banquet he'd rather miss, Data starts having nightmares, and he doesn't know why. Which is the episode's other mystery, and by far the more interesting of the two.

TNG isn't a fantasy show, in that it needs slightly more grounding than "Magic!" as explanation for the seemingly inexplicable. It doesn't always succeed in this, mind you, and I'm not really trying to get into a sci-fi/fantasy debate; all I mean is, "Phantasms" is the sort of episode that uses an ostensibly natural phenomenon—in this case, those invisible bugs which came in with the ship's new warp coil and proceeded to infest every deck and crew-member—as justification for all kinds of craziness. You combine the bugs with Data's dream program, you get nightmares. Where, exactly, those nightmares come from is something the show leaves unexplained, although the fact they're intended as a warning which Data doesn't immediately understand suggests he has some sort of functioning unconscious mind. Although when you think about it, while the nightmares would be helpful in a human being (who wouldn't have nearly as total access to his mind as Data does), in Data, they're a curious sort of malfunction. If Data is able to perceive the creatures infesting the *Enterprise*, wouldn't it be easier for him to just realize he's perceiving them? Either he has to become less efficient to be more human, or else realizing the creatures are on board requires a level of intuition that he's not normally capable of.

I'm willing to give the episode the benefit of the doubt and assume they're going for the latter case (although really, I'd be just as interested in a storyline with Data realizing that imperfection is part of being human), even if I'm not

quite sure how that would work. “Invisible bugs” isn’t the deduction of the century, and the amount Data knows about them in his dream—where the bugs are biting Troi, Riker, and Geordi; that they’re eating cellular peptide; that they’re going for the warp core; and that Data’s brain can emit a pulse that can destroy the lot of them—seems like it should’ve been information that he could’ve put together without the need for an unconscious mind. But, again, I’ll accept it, because it’s freaky and fun and I enjoy it when the show dabbles in a bit of Lynchian horror. And it brings us to a terrific scene in which Picard and Geordi, having realized that Data’s nightmares might be the key to the problem, use the Holodeck to experience a Data dream alongside him. While this is significantly less unsettling than when Data walked through his dreams alone (mainly because we know that Picard and Geordi are safe in a way dream-Data wasn’t; hell, dream-Data got torn to pieces by the miners, in a moment that probably gave 10-year-olds country-wide fits), it’s such a cool, just-plausible-enough idea that it makes for a great climax to the episode.

The big problem here is, well, Data goes a bit mad. More than a bit, actually. He can’t stop thinking about his bad dreams, he starts experiencing those bad dreams while in a supposedly waking state, and then, he stabs Troi in a turbo-lift. Oh sure, he has his reasons. The part of his brain that understand what’s happening also knows that one of the bugs is gnawing on Troi’s shoulder, and he attempts to remove that bug the most direct way he can think of. But while it’s possible to come up with story and character reasons for the scene, it’s such a deeply disturbing moment that it throws everything else in the episode, and, for a moment, the whole show, out of whack. It exposes the dark side of the core of what Data is: a machine, and unlike *The Pirates Of The Caribbean*, when Data breaks down, he could eat the tourists. Yes, it’s possible for human beings to malfunction just like machines, and yes, accepting Data as a crewmember and sentient being means granting that he could possibly have bad days. And yes, what he does to Troi is, in the long view, a good thing. But—well, imagine if someone else in the crew did this. Imagine if it was Riker in the lift. It would still be creepy—especially considering their history—but it wouldn’t be *as* creepy. We could still trust Riker to go back to his usual self. Data, on the other hand... The episode is trying to capitalize on the horror of seeing our most trusted character behave like a psychopath (whatever his intentions), much in the same way [“Descent”](#) did, and once again, there’s no effort to deal with the consequences of his behavior.

Really, this could have been a better episode if it had either found some other way to accomplish what the turbo-lift scene accomplishes, or if it had been more thoughtful about the implications of that attack. But without those approaches, the scene sticks out like a sore thumb, scary in a way that isn’t fun—it’s too much like a something out of a slasher movie, and that’s not a kind of storytelling this show can support. In the end, the day is saved, the bugs (which are also really, really scary) are destroyed and Data and Troi are back to being friends again. They conclude the episode eating a Data-shaped cake, which is cute and all, but I can’t help wondering just comfortable Troi is when she hands Data that knife. She doesn’t flinch—but maybe she should have.

Grade: B+

Stray observations:

- The Freud stuff was funny, although I kind of doubt that three centuries from now therapists will still use Freud as their main (and, at least according to this episode, only) talking point.
- Data’s attempts to study Spot’s sleep patterns are basically adorable.
- In a few of Data’s nightmares, he sees Troi in cake form. The video for Tom Petty’s “Don’t Come Around Here No More” came out eight years before this episode aired. Homage, or friendly rip-off?

Next week: We encounter Lwaxana Troi once again as we turn a “Dark Page,” and figure out why Jean-Luc Picard and Beverly Crusher are so “Attached.”

Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Dark Page”/“Attached”



[Zack Handlen](#)

[10/06/11 10:00AM](#)

“Dark Page” (season 7, episode 7; first aired: Oct. 30, 1993)

Or The One Where Lwaxana has a secret

So then—the last Lwaxana Troi episode. Well, the last Lwaxana Troi *TNG* episode, at least. (She has three more appearances on *Deep Space Nine*, apparently.) The last time we saw her was in season five’s rather dreadful [“Cost Of Living,”](#) which had all kinds of terrifying things like floating clown heads and Alexander sulking, but fortunately, neither of those are in evidence in “Dark Page.” Although once again, we have an episode where someone wanders around someone else’s dreamscape, so you can expect lots of strange camera angles, unsettling sound design, and freaky imagery. As Lwaxana eps go, this isn’t a particularly painful one, in no small part due to the fact that she spends a good half of the time unconscious. It’s also an episode that takes a big risk in terms of her character development, creating out of whole cloth a tragedy in her past—the sort of event which should, really, have been affecting her whole life since. The question here is, can those of us who’ve been with the show since the beginning credibly apply this tragedy to the character in retrospect?

The setup (and I’ll mention here that the first line of my notes for this episode reads “LWAXANA TROI,” like some final howl of a damned soul): Lwaxana is serving as a liaison to the Cairn, a race of beings who communicate with each other solely through telepathy. Which makes me wonder why they have mouths at all, but whatever. The Cairn are interested in joining the Federation, but they need someone to teach them how to talk to non-telepaths, which is where Lwaxana comes in. As a full Betazed, she can participate in their mind-speak, and, as we’ve had ample opportunity to enjoy in the past, she’s very practiced at the art of spoken conversation as well. After spending some

time on their planet, Lwaxana and few select Cairn citizens (an adult male named Maques, and his daughter, Hedril, played by a young Kirsten Dunst) are now aboard the *Enterprise*, as Maques and Hedril attempt to mingle with the crew and expand their knowledge of oral interaction. But while the two Cairn make a decent job of it, something's wrong with Lwaxana.

At first she seems her regular, overly charming self. She tries to force Maques in Deanna's direction, telling him that Deanna is single and desperate for a man, ha-ha. But then she starts getting headaches. She stumbles into Ten-Forward, sees Riker and Troi having a conversation, and starts shrieking at Riker for ruining Deanna's life. And finally, while the meeting with the Cairn and other crewmembers in the *Enterprise*'s arboretum (Betcha forgot we had one of those, didn't you?), she collapses. Troi talks with Maques about the incident, and he struggles to explain something he's noticed in Lwaxana during their time together—a "dark" part of her mind that he can't access. Because of the strain of her work with the Cairn and her need to block off a certain segment of her past, Lwaxana has been driven past her breaking point, and now lies in a coma, fading quickly. Deanna, with Maques's help, needs to form a link with her mother and trying and figure out exactly what's bothering her, and force Lwaxana, for the sake of her life, to face her trauma and come out the other side.

Writing that all out here, I'm not sure I entirely buy it. It makes sense that Lwaxana's contact with the Cairn would put her under a lot of stress, and, given how big a secret this turns out to be, you've got to imagine that the elder Troi has been making a concentrated effort to keep Deanna from sensing it, as well as any other Betazed she's encounter over the years. That's a substantial effort, and you could, if you wanted to, use this to justify some of Lwaxana's excesses. Maybe she pushes so hard for Deanna to marry and start a family because she understands how precious life is, and because she's basically a quarter crazy from having to split her mind down the middle for so long. That makes some sense. It's just convenient that it turns out to be so life-threatening in this case. I don't want make a huge issue over this, because I think the episode (which I didn't hate) has another, bigger problem, but this is a step away from "She's dying of a broken heart," even with the technobabble we get about Betazed brain physiology.

So, much like Picard and Geordi did with Data at the end of "[Phantasms](#)," we have Deanna wandering around Lwaxana's mind, looking for answers. It's a bit unusual that, for the most part, Lwaxana's mind manifests itself with sets from the *Enterprise*, and there's nothing here that's comparable to the eeriness of Data's nightmares, but it's trippy enough. It's too bad this episode fell so quickly after "Phantasms," as that takes away some of the oddness; ho-hum, just another brain-melding story, we do those all the time around here didn't you know? Still, it's fun to see the various ways unconscious Lwaxana tries to prevent Deanna from figuring out the root cause of her disturbance. There's a fake Picard who shows up almost immediately; an attack wolf (why a wolf, of all things, I don't know); and Lwaxana herself. Hedril appears in the dreams, and when Troi tries to approach her, Lwaxana freaks out. There's a mystery here, and between sessions inside her mother's head, Deanna tries to piece together what Lwaxana's hiding. At first, she thinks there must be some connection to Hedril, as the girl keeps appearing in the elder Troi's mind, but in real life, Hedril seems fine, and this isn't the sort of show to have something unpleasant going on between Maques and his daughter. But then Troi realizes (after advice from Data, which actually references "Phantasms" in a semi-oblique way) that dreams have symbols, and that dream-Hedril could be representative of something else. With Picard's help, Troi realizes that a period of entries from her mother's journal have been deleted—a period covering seven years, ending just after she was born. So something happened. Something with a young girl.

It turns out Deana wasn't Lwaxana and her husband's first child. They had another girl named Kestra, who drowned, and in the time since then, Lwaxana has done everything in her power to hide this knowledge away. It's a somewhat powerful scene when Troi finally uncovers all of this, and it's sad in a way that *TNG* doesn't often allow itself to be, acknowledging that even in a utopia, sometimes, bad things happen for no reason. Watching the episode, my initial response was to be frustrated by the out-of-left-field nature of this revelation. We've never had any hints of this in

the past, and while I realize that *TNG* is not a heavily serialized show, and that this sort of twist can exist semi-plausibly in that context, this is something that's so major, it's a lot of ask of an audience to just accept it and move on. Poor Kestra isn't really the issue here, either; it's the idea that Lwaxana has spent so long hiding the existence of her first child. I don't even know how that would work in the future. Her husband was a Starfleet officer, wouldn't this be listed in his records? Wouldn't there be a mention of a sister in Troi's own history or medical records or *something*?

That's not what really bothers me, though. As annoyed as I've been with Lwaxana in her various appearances over the years, I do appreciate that she's a consistent character, and she's occasionally been a fascinating one as well. "Dark Page," intentionally or not, calls all this into question. Her whole philosophy of embracing life, being true to herself, annoying the hell out of Picard with her randiness—suddenly, this is all connected with her daughter's death. I'm not sure if it's intentional or not, but when a long-running show pulls out a major twist of this nature, it throws a familiar character into a new light, and, much as I can't believe I'm typing this, that does Lwaxana a disservice. It's too close to making her a victim. There are ways you could've played this which would've been more effective, but as is, "Dark Page" is a not-too-terrible episode which nonetheless points to what's becoming something of a theme for the seventh season: a show that's working so hard to make an impact that the care and attention it used to put into characterization is in danger of being lost.

Grade: B-

Stray observations:

- Maques's "I'm being serious" face is absolutely hysterical.

"Attached" (season 7, episode 8; first aired: Nov. 6, 1993)

Or The One Where Beverly Reads Jean-Luc's Mind

This could've been a great episode. It very nearly is, in fact. Whereas "Dark Page" tries to create a brand new emotional moment in the guise of something buried, "Attached" serves as the pay-off for something that's been building ever since the start of the series: the relationship between Jean-Luc Picard and Beverly Crusher. Over the course of this episode, Picard and Crusher are forced to face their feelings for one another in the most direct way imaginable, and it generates some of the most quietly moving exchanges we've seen on the show. For once, two adults discussing their feelings for each other on this show doesn't come off as shallow or immature, and that has a large part to do with all the groundwork between them that's already been laid. (So to speak.) Yes, it would've been nice if the show had dealt with this a little earlier, but I'm relieved they dealt with it at all, and I guess it is the sort of big moment you want to save for close to the end. So yeah, this could've been great.

What keeps it from being great is the ending. It's one of the worst cases of "We can't change the status quo!" this show has ever done, and while I wouldn't go so far as to say it cheapens everything that comes before it, it does undo a lot of what "Attached" tries to accomplish. Decisions which exist primarily to serve the interests of a show over the interests of the characters are tricky to pull off. They can work, but there needs to be more of an allowance made toward helping the audience suspend disbelief. Since most of us are aware that what we're watching is a written work, there's always that voice in the back of our minds checking the integrity of what we see. We want to believe the author is playing fair with us; we know none of this is *real*, but we want to pretend it is, and we need to feel like the author is pretending along with us. So when something happens that seems overly convenient in serving that author's needs, a plot development or character choice that keeps the story on a familiar path instead of sending everything off the rails, well, we question that. It's possible to justify what happens at the end of "Attached" as character-driven, but the episode barely even tries. And that's a shame.

The *Enterprise* is visiting Kesprytt III, where a race called the Kes is looking to be allowed into the Federation. The problem is, the Kes aren't the only race living on Kesprytt, and the other race, the Prytt, are isolationists who refuse to even make contact with outsiders, let alone negotiate with them. The Federation doesn't make a habit of allowing planets in who aren't unified in their desire to join, for obvious reasons. If you have two dominant races that aren't on great terms with each other (as the Kes and Prytt clearly aren't), and one suddenly has a connection to the vast network of resources and technology that the Federation represent... well, this is the sort of situation the Prime Directive was made for, isn't it? I suppose it's a sign of open-mindedness and optimism that the *Enterprise* were willing to show up at all. Jean-Luc and Beverly are to beam down to meet with Kes representative Admiral Mauric, but something goes wrong, and the two wake up in a Prytt detention cell. The Prytt are convinced that the Kes are working with the Federation to build a military base on the planet, so they've kidnapped the captain and the doctor, implanted them with neural devices, and are just waiting now to extract information about their plans.

To be honest, the first part of this episode is a bit on the silly side, a lot of elaborate maneuvering to get us to the main event. Once Picard and Crusher escape the Prytt base (with help from a secret Kes double agent), the episode divides into two stories: the captain and the doctor's adventures in the Kesprytt countryside, and Riker's increasingly frustrated attempts to make both the Kes and Prytt governments see reason. The latter plotline is fun, although it once again seems to be there mostly to remind us how silly paranoia-driven politics can be, and how wonderful it is that the Federation has risen above all that nonsense. I'm being a bit harsh, because really, watching Riker negotiate with a couple of equally arrogant morons is entertaining enough to justify its presence. It's just, none of this has much to do with the Picard-Crusher scenes, apart from ensuring they're isolated for a certain period of time, and the Kes-Prytt relationship seems underdeveloped by the end, more a stereotype than an actual entity worth our time.

But hey, the planet-side conversations between Beverly and Jean-Luc are very well done. Once you accept the contrivance of the mind-reading neural devices, it's fascinating to watch how the two slowly realize they're reading each other's thoughts, and how being aware this is happening raises some issues both of them had thought long buried. There's a bit of sniping, but none of it ever seems mean-spirited or damaging to their friendship, which is, I think, nicely observed; after a certain point of knowing someone for so long, you start to get a sense of what they're saying even when they aren't saying it. Beverly is surprised to find out that Picard is often faking it when he makes strong, clear decisions, and she also realizes he hasn't been enjoying the elaborate breakfasts she prepares, but they are so cemented in their roles that none of this really affects anything. It would've been possible to make this into some kind of harrowing psychodrama, but *TNG* takes a lighter, while still thoughtful, approach, and serves both characters well.

The big reveal here is, of course, that Picard is in love with Beverly. Or was in love, at any rate; he knew her before she married Jack, and once their relationship was secure, Picard didn't feel it was his place to say anything. He was also reluctant to have her aboard the *Enterprise*, but he claims that once he saw her again, the issue resolved itself for him, and he no longer had the same feelings. But this isn't the whole truth, as the final scene of the episode makes clear. The chemistry between these two actors has always been strong, and while it makes sense that Picard wouldn't feel the same for Beverly as he did when they first met, in the time since she came on board his ship, a new sort of attachment has formed between them; one that's more relaxed, less driven by intense passions than it is by mutual respect, but still just as warm and intimate. That may be conjecture on my part, but all those shared meals and conversations we've already seen read like scenes between two close friends who are holding back from being more out of fear or respect for the dead or some other combination of the two.

That's why the ending is so frustrating. Jean-Luc and Beverly eventually make it back to the *Enterprise* after Riker elbow-bends the various factions into letting them go. They meet for dinner in Picard's quarters after they've both had the neural implants removed, and after discussing their experience, Picard makes his move. And Beverly turns

him down. Conceptually, I don't have a huge problem with this, as there are plenty of arguments you could make to keep the two apart. Maybe Picard reminds Beverly too much of her dead husband, or maybe Picard can't stand to be in a relationship with someone on his ship after his last relationship went pear-shaped. But all we get is Beverly saying, "Or perhaps we should be afraid." That's it. After spending an entire episode establishing how good a couple these two would be, how well-suited they are for each other and how much they love each other, "Attached" chickens out in the end, and doesn't even have the decency to pretend it's doing anything else. At its best, "Attached" is a great example of how a long-running show can use its wealth of history to create resonant character moments that stem naturally from everything that's come before; at its worst, it's a great example of how long-running shows can compromise themselves out of a desire to avoid change. The latter doesn't ruin the former, but it does deflate what might have been a classic.

Grade: B+

Stray Observations:

- The Prytt outfits are ridiculous. At times, that whole subplot seems like something that had leaked through from the original *Trek*.
- "You're acting like you know exactly which way to go, but you're really only guessing. Do you do this all the time?"

Next week: The *Enterprise* encounters a "Force Of Nature," and Data has to deal with his "Inheritance."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Force Of Nature”/“Inheritance”



[Zack Handlen](#)

[10/13/11 10:00AM](#)

“Force Of Nature” (season 7, episode 9; first aired Nov. 13, 1993)

Or The One Where The Enterprise Should Get Its Exhaust Checked

For an episode which takes aim at one of the *Trek* franchise’s most long-running assumptions, “Force Of Nature” spends an awful lot of time focused on Data’s cat, Spot. First Geordi borrows Spot because he wants to get an idea of what pet ownership is like; then Geordi freaks out because pet ownership is more demanding (and more potentially destructive) than he realized, and tells Data that he has to train his cat. Then Data attempts to train his cat. Then—well, we never find out what happens next, exactly, because by that point the *Enterprise* is neck deep in crisis mode, trying to rescue a missing ship and deal with some crazy alien scientists. But those first 20 minutes are, basically, driven by the nutty adventures of Data, Geordi and That Darn Cat. It’s a curious narrative choice, to say the least, especially since these adventures have nothing to do with the episode’s main focus: the potentially dangerous effects of warp drive use on the fabric of space-time. That’s a big a deal, and you’d think it would merit the focus of an entire hour.

For what it’s worth, I didn’t hate The Spot Chronicles. It’s a matter of taste (well, more so than usual, I mean), but watching Geordi and Data chat about feline obedience rituals has a certain fascination to it. La Forge is kind of a jerk about it, assuming that simply because he doesn’t know how to handle a cat, the cat has to change. But the rapport between him and his robot buddy—Geordi as slightly condescending as always, Data as patient as ever—has a laid back affability to it that helps it to go down easy. It’s a hang-out subplot, a storyline which exists primarily to

let us enjoy the characters and not get overly concerned with plot. This makes for an oddly structured episode, with a comparatively large amount of time given over to a plot with low stakes and no real drama. We find out about the trouble with Spot, we get a discussion or two about the difficulties of training cats (to wit: you can't), and then we get a joke about how Spot trained Data better than Data will ever train him—a joke which I didn't realize till just now is intended as the end beat for the plot. It's all sort of *Reader's Digest*-y, but charming enough.

As for the real meat of "Nature," well, I respect the ambition; I'm just not sure it's a choice that works for this show, at this point in the run. The *Enterprise* is working its way through the Hekaras Corridor, a safe path of space through an area filled with tetryon fields. They're looking for the *Fleming*, a missing science ship last seen in the corridor. While on the hunt, our heroes come across a Ferengi ship floating seemingly dead in the water (so to speak). The Ferengi are playing possum, to a certain extent; there's an exchange of fire, the *Enterprise* comes out victorious, and when Picard contacts the other ship, the DaiMon accuses him and the rest of Starfleet of setting out a trap. The Ferengi came across a Federation buoy, but when they approached it, the buoy sent out a pulse that disabled the engines of their ship. No one knows what's going on, but the *Fleming* is still missing, so the search continues, right up until the *Enterprise* finds a buoy much like the one the Ferengi described. It's emitting a distress signal, and when the *Enterprise* responds, their engines are hit, knocking out their shields. Once the shields are down, another ship appears, and two Hekarans beam aboard. They're from Hekaras Two, the only planet in the corridor with intelligent life, and they set out the buoys as a way to attract attention. They claim that the continued use of warp drive is disrupting the fabric of space, and, if it continues, it will ultimately destroy their home world.

Have we had activists on *TNG* before? It feels like we must have, but I can't remember any off the top of my head. Surely none as strident as Serova, the genius scientist who demands that others immediately agree with everything she says. Her brother, Rabal, is a little less strident, but he can't do much to keep Serova from alienating anyone she comes in contact with through her stridency and impatience. Serova eventually gives her life to prove her theories correct, and while it's hard to feel too bad about seeing her go, it is a fairly abrupt way to make a point. "Force Of Nature" does a decent job of empathizing with the Hekarans' frustration, and it's interesting to see the *Enterprise* on a losing end of this sort of conservationist struggle. So much of the series has been about Picard and the rest of the ensemble stressing at every opportunity the importance of non-interference that it's a change of pace when Picard starts talking about bringing evidence to the Science Council and so forth. Even coming from Picard, who's so reasonably and adult about these situations, the response seems insufficient to Serova's demands. As annoying as she is, if she's right, her entire planet is in danger, and every ship that passes by traveling at warp speed is going to make the situation worse. Anyone who's paid any attention to governmental attempts to manage environmental dangers (like, say, the climate change "debate") will see parallels here. Picard has the best of intentions, but even the most genial, conflict-free bureaucracies are very, very slow. If you've spent years trying to get someone to pay attention, it must be next to impossible to maintain perspective when you keep getting forced through the same tired steps.

So Serova gets back in her ship and overloads the warp drive in her engine, destroying the ship, killing herself, but demonstrating that excessive warp can create rifts in space. (The problem I have with this is that part of the discussion was the debate over whether or not warp had a *cumulative* effect. Sure, Serova has shown that a whole lot of warp all at once does significant damage, but all she's really done is proven that people shouldn't blow up their space ships.) Quibbles aside, this convinces a shocked, and somewhat guilty, *Enterprise* crew, but before they can report their findings to the Federation, they have to rescue the *Fleming*; and thanks to Serova, the *Fleming* is now trapped inside a rift. Data comes up with a plan, he and Geordi work out how to implement it, and after a few close calls, the day is saved. Only, there's still that worrisome possibility that traveling at warp speed can be damaging to the continuity of space-time. The law is handed down: travel through the Hekaras Corridor is restricted to essential

personnel only, and from now on, Federation ships can only travel at speeds up to warp five, unless in cases of extreme emergency.

Nothing says fun like restrictive regulation, eh? I respect that *TNG* was willing to try on an idea this big, and this potentially status-quo shifting. Warp drive has been essential (if understandably magic-seeming) part of *Trek* lore since the start of the first show, and it's always been treated as a given, a necessary piece of hand-waving required to justify all this jaunting around the galaxy. To raise the possibility that all of this might have consequences after all is a big deal, and it does fit in well with *TNG*'s general approach to storytelling. It's also impressive the way the episode subtly ties in the potential danger of space travel with Geordi's need to one-up a fellow engineer. He tells Data there's no real reason he wants to make sure he's beating the other guy. It's just a problem he wants to solve, based on his pride and the fact that problem solving is how he defines himself. It's the pursuit of scientific advancement without any need. While warp drive is a necessity for space travel, the potential consequences of the episode make you wonder how much of all the development and progress was driven by need, and how much of it came from just wanting to one up the next guy.

That said, I'm not sure the show needed this, especially not this late in the run. If *TNG* was more interested in serialization, the sudden restriction of warp drive might have had an impact, but given we don't have that many episodes left to get through, it's hard to imagine this coming up again. As is, it's going to have a minimal effect, and while we've had plenty of *TNG* episodes that didn't linger long after the end credits, something this game-changing (dammit, I was trying to avoid that phrase) seems like it *should* last longer. But even more importantly than that, I don't know if I really need a show whose primary focus is on hoping from world to world and having adventures and so forth to suddenly get worried about this kind of consequence. Restrictions can help stories come into shape, but this kind of restriction just seems arbitrary to me, and far too depressing. I want Picard traveling the stars, not checking his exhaust fumes.

Grade: B

Stray observations:

- At some point in my notes, I wrote "A little too shticky." I'm assuming this has to do with the Geordi/Data plot, so watch out for that.
- It would be easier to take the Hekarans seriously if I didn't keep wanting to ask them how difficult it is to feed the mouth on their forehead.
- "Geordi, I cannot stun my cat." Funny line. Also, Geordi claims he was joking, but I really don't think he was.
- Serova announces she's going to "give them proof." At some point, every mad scientist in the history of mad science has said this.

"Inheritance" (season 7, episode 10; first aired Nov. 20, 1993)

Or The One Where Data Gets His Cradle Rocked

Maybe what's going on here is that season seven is when the writers decide to start throwing out every story idea they've got left, because it's season seven so why the hell not. So we've had a crazy dream story with Data; we've uncovered the lost, dead daughter of Lwaxana Troi; we've resolved (sort of) the romantic tension between Picard and Beverly Crusher; and now, we've got Data meeting his mother. Only she's not really his mother, she's actually an exact robot duplicate of his mother. That's strange enough, but it's weirder than that, because no one knows that Mom (aka Dr. Juliana Tainer, played by Fionnula Flanagan, better known to most of us as Eloise Hawking from [Lost](#)) is a robot. And it's weirder than *that*, because *Mom* doesn't know she's a robot. Somehow she's managed

to live a normal life, even get married, without anyone stumbling across her secret. All this time, we've assumed that Data was the pinnacle of Dr. Soong's achievements, a mechanical man who needed to develop his own humanity through patience and careful study. Turns out, he came out with a better model before he died. I guess he figured out that emotion chip.

Oh, you can fudge this some. The reason Juliana (who seems shockingly warm and loving, especially if you're more familiar with her work as Ms. Hawking) is so warm and effusive while Data struggles to grasp the concept of emotion? That's because Juliana is based on a real person, the actual Juliana who was once married to Dr. Soong. That Juliana died shortly after the crystalline entity attacked (this was when Data was originally dismantled, before the Federation found him), and, to cope with his grief, Soong built a back-up. As *Blade Runner* has taught us, robots with human memories have an easier time with feelings and empathy and so forth, so you could say that Juliana is such a leap forward from Data largely due to her cheated past. But this raises still more questions, and none of the answers put Soong in a positive light. The challenge with doing an episode like this one, which attempts to fill in a piece of backstory we didn't realize was missing, is that the writers need to understand the ramifications of what they're doing, not just for the episode itself but for the series as a whole. "Inheritance," while compelling in its way, doesn't seem to realize its own implications, while at the same time hitting a reset button at its conclusion that prevents any of the potential fallout from ever being questioned again.

It's a bit late in the game now to start coming up with new catchphrases in these reviews, but I feel like there should be a "[blank] of the Week" term for the regular MacGuffin-like crisis that launches the *Enterprise* into action with each new episode. These crises need to be important enough to merit the attention of Starfleet's flagship, but they also need to be straightforward enough that they don't distract too much from the real story. Bonus points if it's a crisis that can, when necessary, place certain cast members at risk, giving the writers something to punch up the third act. We've had a plethora of missing ships; we've had planets worried about asteroids, planets in danger of drying out, populations that need a vaccine to prevent the spread of disease. In "Inheritance," Atrea 4's molten core is, essentially, drying out, and the *Enterprise* shows up to help fix the problem, with some assistance from Dr. Tainer and her husband. (That's a bit of a coincidence, isn't it? It's not surprising that Juliana is a brilliant scientist, but geology is a long way from robotics. There's nothing to stop her from having a different scientific discipline than Soong, but it's never mentioned, and it seems more to fall under the "If you're smart in one thing, you know everything" heading that *TNG* occasionally indulges in. Even then, this might have worked better if Juliana and Data's meeting had been more a matter of choice than of chance.) The molten core problem takes up part of the episode, with the expected amount of techno-babble, and it indirectly leads to Data finding proof the Juliana is an android, but it's not the sort of story element you'll remember afterwards.

That's probably because the rest of "Inheritance" is loopy. Juliana admits to Data that she's his mother, telling him that she was married to Soong when he built his androids, and that she didn't seek him out earlier because she had too much guilt over abandoning him when the entity attacked. Much is made over the growing rapprochement between Data and his newfound mother, but, while it's sweet to see him getting positive reinforcement from her (everybody needs unconditional love from someone), there's something odd going on. Partly it's that Flanagan's warmth is so excessive that it invites suspicion, and part of it is that Data questions her legitimacy from the start. We're conditioned by now to trust Data's judgment (occasional stabbings aside—and even then, it was a stabbing with the victim's best interest at heart), and the fact that he immediately doubts her word means we doubt her as well. And yet, his doubt is more human than mechanical; it's the same doubt anyone would have if a stranger arrived claiming to have a right to a piece of your heart. Plus, his initial doubts are unfounded—there was a Juliana, she was married to Soong, and she was around during Data's "childhood."

It's just, as mentioned previously, that Juliana is dead. Watching this episode, I started to suspect that the current Juliana might be a robot somewhere around the 15-minute mark (give or take), but the idea was so ridiculous I did

my best to dismiss it. What makes those scenes between Data and Mom pre-reveal so strange is that it seems like there's going to be another twist coming, but you can't be sure it'll happen. So you get stuck, because you aren't sure if you should be enjoying their interactions, or combing over them for clues. And then when the real answer hits, it's at once inevitable *and* a huge reach, because this show doesn't do impostor robots. It's had people pretending to be other people, it's had aliens taking over people's bodies, but the whole reason Data (and Lore) are so important is that he's a singularity. He has artificial intelligence, and he looks mostly human. To come up with another robot who can be mistaken—and has been mistaken, many, many times—for a human is, quite frankly, cheating. It doesn't reduce Data's value, but it does put a dent in one of the show's fundamental precepts, in a way that isn't particularly well thought out at all.

For one thing, it's difficult to believe that Soong was able to design an android so complex and, on the surface, so biologically indistinguishable from a woman. At one point Beverly mentions that Juliana-bot has a device that feeds false information to medical scanners, and while I'm glad they explained how the machine could go undetected in a universe with transporters and scanners, it's an explanation that raises its own questions. Like, how easy is to build something like that? Also, wouldn't Juliana-bot weigh more than a regular human? I guess Soong could've equipped her with some sort of weight-reducing anti-grav device. Surely at some point she's gone to see a doctor. Given that she was built, not born, I can accept that she wouldn't have to worry about the flu (although you'd think a machine this complex would have an occasional hiccup), but surely at her age, she'd do regular check-ups as a matter of course. Maybe the super high-tech future saves her there; maybe doctors would just wave a tricorder around her and call it good.

All of this is a stretch, and it makes the episode's big moral decision harder to take seriously. Data (and Beverly and Picard and Troi and god knows who else) discover Juliana's secret. Then Data alone has to decide whether or not to tell his mother her true nature. It's an interesting question, although I'm troubled by the way Data's decision not to tell Juliana seems to serve the show's needs more than his (or her) own. Yes, there are reasons for keeping it secret—there's no telling how Juliana would react (and give how upset she was about abandoning Data, I'm guessing she'd freak out quite a lot), and there's no immediate gain in telling her. Yet keeping it secret also means that *TNG* doesn't need to remember Juliana in later episodes, or deal with any sort of fallout from introducing another, significantly more advanced robot into the show's world. Troi claims that Juliana has achieved what Data has struggled to achieve for so long: humanity. But this isn't true. Data wants to be himself as a human. It's hard to know what Juliana-bot is, but she isn't self-aware, and that means she'll always just be a copy of someone else's dream.

About that "someone else": What I really take away from "Inheritance" is that Dr. Soong is a deeply screwed-up individual, and, what's worse, no one on the show seems to recognize this. He built a robot copy of his dying wife. Juliana was in a coma at the time, so I doubt he asked her permission. He designed the copy to be as indistinguishable from the real thing as possible. Then, after Juliana died, he went on living with the robot as man and wife. Only, he was so inept as a husband that the robot eventually left him, and instead of realizing maybe that would be a good time to end the charade, Soong lets Juliana-bot go off on her own to marry someone else. She goes by the dead woman's name, and, since she's apparently the most prominent scientist on the planet in her chosen field, presumably no one else knows the real Juliana is dead. She mentions a mother—does she have any other family? Have they hung out with a robot and thought it was their own flesh and blood? Soong is doing the worst kind of mad science here, playing God in an arrogant, selfish tribute to his lost love, and no one seems at all bothered by this. Soong even left a holographic recording of himself in Juliana-bot's head, in case anyone found the truth, and the only guilt to be found on it is his regret at not being a better husband. It's not so much that Juliana-bot *has* to be an abomination; it's more that not a single character in the cast questions the morality or implications of the situation. No one even says, "Wow, that machine has feelings and isn't insane! Surely this means something."

Thought it's competent as an hour of television, "Inheritance" is the worst kind of science fiction, using tropes without bothering to wonder what any of them might mean.

Grade: B-

Stray observations:

- One more bit of creepiness: Soong programmed Juliana to eventually die. Spared no expense!

Next week: Worf has to handle some tricky "Parallels," and we take a trip on "The Pegasus."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Parallels”/“The Pegasus”



[Zack Handlen](#)

[10/20/11 10:00AM](#)

“Parallels” (season 7, episode 11; first aired Nov. 27, 1993)

Or The One Where Worf Gets Promoted, Married, And Geordi Killed

The hardest part about starting a review—starting anything, really—is finding the opening line. It doesn’t have to be perfect, it doesn’t even have to be all that good, but it does need to be something that helps you find a way into the rest of the article, or essay, or story. Sooner or later, I’ll figure something out, but whatever choice I make, I’ll be leaving something behind. Like: Worf has been well-served by *TNG* in the past, but almost exclusively in storylines that focused on his Klingon heritage. Or: Every great episode of television needs to have at least one unforgettable image, and the sight of a million *Enterprises* suddenly winking into existence in the same limited area of space is as unforgettably bizarre as anything the show has ever managed. Or: This comes as something of a shock—a week of two solid-to-excellent *TNG* episodes, and one of them even has a successful, if somewhat unexpected, romantic relationship. Or: We’re back to one of my favorite types of stories this week, something from the “mucking about with timelines” genre, and thankfully, we don’t have to deal with any irritating impersonations from iconic historical figures. (Can you imagine what Oscar Wilde would’ve looked like on this show?) Or I could just muck about with some meta-foolishness that people will assume is a technical error.

The point is, eventually I have to pick something. And when I do, that means all the choices I didn’t make will disappear forever. That’s life: a constant process of eliminating options. You have to wonder, though, what might have happened if you’d decided otherwise. As Data mentions in this episode, some scientists theorize that there’s a universe for each possible outcome of any given choice. It’s a daunting thought, and a little claustrophobic, but it

makes you wonder, if it were possible to travel between all those universes, what might you see? What others of you are there out there, and how different would your life have gone if you had picked a different major in college (or if you'd gone to college at all); if you'd missed a phone call; if you'd opened a different door; if you'd gone left instead of right. Would you still be you, or are our presences in this world as much defined by what we have done as by what we have. "Parallels" is a fun, trippy bit of sci-fi that has Worf ricocheting through possibilities with little grasp of what's happening to him. It has the good sense to take a great idea and push it to its logical extremes. The plotting leaves a little to be desired in the climax, but it's a minor flaw, and the sight of Worf and Deanna Troi hooking up is not to be missed.

Worf has been away from the *Enterprise* on leave to compete in a (unsurprisingly violent) Klingon sport. Worf won the competition ("Several contestants were maimed, but I was triumphant."), the victory has him in a good mood; unfortunately, it's also his birthday, and he knows from experience this means that his co-workers and friends among the *Enterprise* crew are going to throw him a surprise party. This assumption proves correct, but during the party, Worf starts experiencing dizzy spells. Worse, every time he recovers from the dizziness, he finds elements in his environment have changed. At first the shifts are subtle: a painting moved to a different wall, people standing in different places, Picard being present after Riker informed Worf that Picard was unable to make it to the festivities. But as the days wear on, the changes become more extreme. Complicating matters, the *Enterprise* is currently investigating the malfunctioning Argus Array, located near the borders of Federation space. Geordi and Data have reason to believe that the Romulans may have reprogrammed the array to spy on nearby outposts, which is bad enough, but then Worf has a dizzy spell and, suddenly, no one but Worf remembers hearing about the Romulans at all. The jumps keep coming, and the changes keep getting more extreme, until Worf shifts on the bridge into the middle of a battle with a Romulan ship. This time, even the *Enterprise*'s control panels have changed, enough so that Worf is unable to bring the shields up in time to prevent a Romulan hit.

So, clearly, this is more than just stress, or a concussion, or any other primarily medical cause. What makes the first half of "Parallels" so much fun to watch is how subtly the episode eases us into its premise. The first shift happens fairly early on, but it's presented as a weird glitch, observed and then quickly forgotten. You suspect something must be up, since shows rarely have characters commenting on continuity errors for no reason, but there's a long enough gap between the first few shifts that it becomes to doubt those suspicions. I'm not saying that I watched this episode and thought for a moment that it would turn into a low-key drama about Worf asking Troi to be Alexander's godmother (sort of; it's a Klingon concept), but I did appreciate "Parallels'" patience in getting to the point. This makes it easier to empathize and even share Worf's growing confusion. As outside viewers, well-trained in the cues and tropes of fiction, it's easier for us to recognize that something's happening, but by refusing to draw attention to the shifts beyond minor camera movement, the episode forces us to be more actively engaged in what's going on. Plus, it also helps ground the fairly insane final act.

The second half of "Parallels" is fun because it's a treat to see the different variations the show can put Worf through without ever fundamentally changing who he is, or his place on the *Enterprise*. This isn't the sort of mirror-universe style storyline in which we get to see familiar faces cast in entirely different lights; Worf's wild ride is more akin to something like *Community*'s ["Remedial Chaos Theory,"](#) in which one small change (who goes for pizza?) leads to seven different iterations, with characters remaining consistent even while their situation does not. "Parallels" has more time to play with, and a larger area to play with, and the episode has fun with trying out different directions without having to bust out the agony booth. In this universe, Worf's painting is on a different wall. In *this* universe, Worf and Troi are dating. One more dizzy spell, and now Worf is married to Troi. I'm not sure there's a logical story reason for it (maybe the shifts are cumulative somehow, and each one brings him to a more substantially altered timeline than the last?), but each time Worf jumps to a different universe, the change is more drastic than before, building to the final shift in which Worf is First Officer, and Riker is captain of the *Enterprise*, having been officially

promoted after Picard's death during the Borg attack of ["Best Of Both Worlds."](#) Oh, and Wesley's hanging around, so that's nice.

There are a number of small but effective dramatic moments in "Parallels"; on the whole, this is a nicely balanced episode, changing timelines enough to keep us disoriented, but still managing to find room for some effective emotional beats. The most obvious of those are the increasingly passionate exchanges between Worf and Troi: they begin the episode with Worf asking Troi to take a slightly largely role in his son's life, and before the end, he'll learn there's a universe in which he and the counselor have had two children. (In this universe, Alexander doesn't even exist; if it wasn't for Picard's death, I'd think it was tragic Worf couldn't just stay there.) The Worf/Troi connection is a little out-of-left-field, but it works, by and large. The two actors have great chemistry together, and while I wasn't moved to tears by Wife-Troi's protestations of love, I was impressed at how well the episode sold the idea of the two of them being together. It also gave us a hilariously awkward scene in which Girlfriend-Troi undoes Worf's hair and attempts to massage his back to ease his tension—Worf's shocked reaction demonstrated once again how terrific Dorn's comic timing is. (He and Patrick Stewart are arguably the funniest actors on the show, because neither of them overplay the jokes.) Beyond the romantic scenes, Other-Riker gets a few great exchanges as well, once the Alternate *Enterprises* show up; the first, when he talks to Picard (*our* Picard), and then, when he meets a version of himself from a far more disturbing universe. It's nothing huge, but it a sign of a great episode when it can allow for moments of character work in the midst of the action.

Criticism-wise, it's unfortunate that the finale has as much tech-babble as it does. As mentioned, the shot of thousands of *Enterprises* popping into one timeline is a great visual, but by relying on a sort of sci-fi MacGuffin to explain everything *and* resolve the crisis, "Parallels" takes Worf away from the center of the plot for a while, reducing him to a piece on a game board while Riker, Data, and Wesley discuss the best way to solve his problems. As well, it's almost too bad that it takes so much time to get the multiple *Enterprise* section, as once that starts, there really isn't time for much more than a mention or two of the other timelines. But these are minor complaints. This is an exciting, clever, and well-written hour of television, and one that finds the heart in what might've been dry concept. Worf may not be responsible for getting himself out of his predicament, but in the last scene, he does take a sort of action based on his recent experiences. It may not lead anywhere, but by inviting Troi to dinner (after she kindly helps him get out of that much hated surprise party), Worf is acknowledging that there are choices we don't make simply because it never occurs to us to make them; and that some possibilities are worth exploring in any universe.

Grade: A-

Stray observations:

- It's surprising that Wesley shows up here and has so little to do; he gets a couple lines, but really, it could've been anybody.
- Worf's freaked out look at Lwaxana potentially being his stepmother is hilarious
- Forgot to mention: Geordi's VISOR is at least partly to blame for what happens. Funny how nobody seems too broken up when he "dies."
- Here's something I don't understand: what happened to the *other* Worf's? You know, the ones our Worf is supplanting as he goes hopping around from place to place. Wife-Troi seems to think that her Worf is never coming back, and no one contradicts this.
- "Captain, we're receiving 285,000 hails."

"The Pegasus" (season 7, episode 12; first aired Jan. 8, 1994)

Or The One Where Terry O'Quinn Plays A Man Whose Obsessions Drive Him Close To Madness—No, The Other One

Two high-quality episodes in one week—I feel like I won a lottery. (Or else that someone is softening me up for the kill, considering that “Sub Rosa” is coming next week.) And two very different episodes as well. “Parallels,” for all its occasional darkness, was essentially a lark, a trippy genre exercise with some fun, good-natured character development. “The Pegasus” is quite a bit heavier, featuring an actual villain (Terry O’Quinn, playing another in a long line of psychotic admirals), a ship full of corpses stuck inside an asteroid, and a compromised Will Riker. There’s also shouting, drama, yelling, and a very, very pissed-off Picard—and if you’re guessing this is a Ron Moore episode, good show. “Pegasus” allows our heroes to end things on a far more positive note than [Battlestar Galactica](#) ever did, but there’s still that same fundamental belief in the corruptive influence of power, and how a military mind can have a difficult time grasping that the arms race doesn’t really have a winning side. Plus, there’s Riker having a past that makes him a few shades less than perfect, and if there are few things Moore loves more as a writer than tarnished heroes.

Before the grimness gets going, however, we get a rather delightful cold open: The school children of the *Enterprise* have made a variety of arts and crafts to celebrate the annual Picard Day, and the captain, Troi, and Riker are looking over the results. Picard is, unsurprisingly, extremely uncomfortable about all of this. The only way the situation could possibly be worse for him is if the children were there right then, watching as he judged their efforts—and you just know that any decision he makes is going to require him praising the winner personally. Troi argues in favor of the display, and Riker’s there to make jokes. It’s all quite hilarious (neat to see how far this show has come; I can’t even imagine how botched this would’ve been if they’d tried something similar in the first season), until Picard gets a special message from Starfleet. The *Enterprise* has new orders: It’s to pick up Admiral Eric Pressman (O’Quinn), and head out in search for the *Pegasus*, Pressman’s former ship. The *Pegasus* had been assumed lost for years now, but pieces have turned up recently indicating that the ship may still be intact somewhere, and now it’s of crucial importance that the Federation find it before the Romulans do.

There’s something else, too, although we don’t find out about it for a while. The *Pegasus* was Riker’s first tour of duty, and Pressman his first commanding officer. The two keep exchanging looks, Pressman’s avid, Riker’s uncomfortable, and whenever they talk in private, the conversation is heated; there’s an “experiment” that may still be on board the *Pegasus*, a piece of equipment that makes Riker very, very uncomfortable to talk about. We also get telling hints about their former relationship when Pressman has an informal chat with Picard. Picard explains that the reason he picked Riker as his first officer was that he respected Will’s confidence and ability to follow his own judgment. To him, Riker is a man who can obey orders without sacrificing his own moral compass. Pressman is surprised by this. On board the *Pegasus*, he tells Picard, Will was a very different sort of officer. Clearly, there’s a past here, and it’s one which has definite relevance in the present, especially now that the dread Romulans have arrived. One of the many highlights of “Pegasus” is watching Picard chat with Commander Siral, captain of the *Terix*. They are both excessively polite, but the threats are unmistakable. (You almost wonder if part of Picard’s fury at the end is due to the fact that he’ll have to apologize to this creep for Pressman’s actions.)

Eventually, the *Enterprise* crew is able to track the *Pegasus* to where it got stuck so many years ago—the inside of an asteroid. (We’re in the Devolin System, in case you were wondering.) The ship is half stuck in the rock, and that turns out to be a big clue as to exactly what’s going on here. Picard does some digging, and discovers that there were suspicions of a mutiny on board the *Pegasus*, and that no one did much in the way of investigating what really happened on the ship that led to Riker and Pressman (and a few others) escaping. Picard confronts Riker with this, and if there was any doubt that this was a Moore episode to the bone, that disappears here: Picard is frustrated, and he’s especially frustrated at the way his first officer and an outsider are seemingly conspiring together to keep him in the dark. He doesn’t know exactly what kind of danger he’s putting the *Enterprise* in, and Pressman’s determination

to push forward (or press—wow, the name’s practically Dickensian, isn’t it) without providing any new answers is making the worst out of a bad situation. The fact that he can’t even completely trust Riker to keep him informed during the crisis is clearly getting to him. It’s easy to accept Pressman as the villain. He’s new, and we’ve had a long history of Starfleet creeps from all over the chain of command. But Riker? Finding out Riker has a blemish on his record stings a little, as it was clearly intended to, and watching him and Picard fight is unsettling. Everybody’s chums on board the *Enterprise*! Quick, somebody make ’em hug.

Unsettling can make for great drama, though, and like other tense episodes on *TNG*, “Pegasus” makes the most out of bending the ties between its main characters without actually going so far as to break them. While this episode shares certain basic ideas with *BSG*, the essential safety of the core group—the belief that these are all inherently decent people and that they can work together to achieve common goals—remains intact. If anything, the occasional testing makes those ties even stronger, much like the eventual revelation about Will’s past sins serve to make his current steadfast decency seem wiser and more earned. After forcing Picard to take the *Enterprise* inside the asteroid to get closer to the *Pegasus*, Pressman and Riker beam aboard their old ship, where they find an engineering section half fused with solid rock. It turns out the “experiment” Pressman has been so keen to get back is a new kind of cloaking device, one that allows a ship to go invisible and phase through solid matter. This is a big deal—and it also violates the Treaty of Algeron which the Federation signed, prohibiting the development and use of cloaking devices. Pressman doesn’t care, and he also didn’t give much thought to his crew’s safety years ago, which is what prompted the mutiny. Riker, being young and inexperienced, sided with Pressman, and, as ordered, kept silent about what happened ever since. He’s not proud of this.

As horrible as it goes, this one ranks low on the outrage scale, and that’s smart. While this episode gets mileage out of the tension between Riker and Pressman *and* Riker and Picard, that tension isn’t about us discovering some awful thing that Will’s done that changes everything we know about the character. This isn’t the “drowned kid reveal,” or anywhere close to that. This is more about making a mistake when you don’t really know any better, and then having to deal with the consequences of that mistake; not because it’s punishment or because of karmic retribution, but because that’s just what happens sometimes. And more than that, it’s about how locking on to a single idea can be dangerous. On the *Pegasus*, Riker was lacking in self-confidence and confused, so he latched on to the principle that the people in power are always right, even when they aren’t. Pressman is committed to getting the most powerful weapon the Federation can develop, regardless of what that means in the long term. “Pegasus” could’ve been overly harsh or melodramatic; instead, it works towards reaffirming the basic principles of the show, and of Picard’s *Enterprise*, by demonstrating the behavior that arises when people put aside careful consideration in favor of knee-jerk response. It seems like a criticism directed at the military, too, both in young Riker’s foolhardy commitment to the chain of command, and Pressman’s fixation on militaristic goals above political and social ones.

Or maybe it’s just reminding us once again that obsession (which has a tendency to short circuit common sense) is never a good idea. Pressman and Riker bring the cloaking device back on board the *Enterprise*, but when the *Terix* gets the drop on the ship, Riker tells Picard about the “experiment,” and offers the device as a way to cut through the asteroid and deal with the Romulans in open space. We get another great scene between two terrific actors, as Stewart and O’Quinn face off—but once Riker comes clean about what’s going on, Pressman has basically lost. He tries to take command of the *Enterprise*, but Worf refuses his orders, and Picard has Pressman arrested. Riker turns himself in, too. Oh sure, he gets off in the end—it’s Riker, and Riker always gets off (that one was for free, folks)—but it’s satisfying to see him turn himself in just the same. Not because we want him arrested, or because we feel he needs to get punished—well, I certainly didn’t want or feel either of those things. What I did feel, though, was a sense of justice being served, of an order being re-established. Again, unlike *BSG*, the good guys get to stay good guys at the end, and they still have a way to wash their hands clean of sin. I appreciate the darkness an

edgier drama can provide, but there's something to be said for a show where the only permanent crimes are committed by the guest stars.

Grade: A-

Stray observations:

- Not going to lie—I don't know why I didn't go for the full "A" on either of these. Just a gut feeling. (They're both very good, though.)
- According to Memory Alpha, (SPOILER ALERT ABOUT *ENTERPRISE*) the last episode of *Enterprise* takes place during this episode. Even knowing how *Enterprise* ended, that sounds bizarre.
- Also according to Memory Alpha, this is the first time we've gotten an explanation for why the Federation doesn't use cloaking devices.

Next week: We get to re-open the Prime Directive debate when we head "Homeward," and Beverly has a forbidden romance in "Sub Rosa."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Homeward”/“Sub Rosa”



[Zack Handlen](#)

[10/27/11 10:00AM](#)

“Homeward” (season 7, episode 13; first aired January 15, 1994)

Or The One Where Worf Takes A Long Walk In A Small Room

I can’t remember the last time I successfully applied a principle in my life. I was going to start this review with some grand statement about how it’s important to have moral guidelines to get you through the complications and confusion that everyone one of has to face day in, day out. Then I realized, I’m not sure that’s actually true. Most of the ethical choices I make are so muddled up in emotion and circumstance and timing that they barely ever feel like choices. I really only realize the decision in retrospect, and the idea of applying some kind of consistent system to conversations or work obligations or relationships seems a little like solving a Rubik’s Cube while blindfolded, drunk, and wearing mittens. And yet, given the chaos (and all things considered, my life isn’t that nuts), it seems like it would be more important than ever to have some way to stay grounded. Maybe it’s like being an actor. During rehearsals, you take direction and comments on your work, but in the moment of the performance, 95 percent of the notes you get drop away. You just do your best and hope some of it sticks. Maybe that’s why we spend most of our childhood learning the same three or four lessons—so we can do our best as grown-ups, and hope some of it sticks.

Maybe that’s also why Picard and the others spend so much time talking about the Prime Directive, and reminding each other of the importance of noninterference at the drop of a hat. (“Wait! Don’t pick up that hat. It has a pre-space technology culture.”) They’re faced with situations which test their resolve on a regular basis, and these are really tough tests; we’re not talking “Should I tell the waitress she has the wrong change?” We’re talking living, breathing sentient beings, and playing god, and not being able to see the consequences of your actions in the long term. That’s

the really scary part right there, and the reason why staying aloof, even when it seems impossible, makes the most sense in the long run. Still, I'm not sure any principle can be completely ironclad (I'm a big fan of John Fowles' "Do no unnecessary harm," but who gets to decide what "necessary" means?), and "Homeward" takes a long, slow look at an instant where the Prime Directive is pushed to an absolute extreme. It's an episode about consequences, about examining assumptions and presenting two disparate views of the world and refusing to tell us which one to choose. I should be all over this shit. So why was I so bored?

We're back in the doldrums with this week's doubleheader, and while "Sub Rosa" is by far the worst of the two, at least it wasn't as much a grind as watching the *Enterprise* pull a long con on a group of generically naïve aliens. There are all the pieces here of an interesting episode. We have a world-threatening climatic catastrophe; extensive use of the holodeck in a fairly reasonable, non-horrible fashion; extensive debate about the obligations and responsibilities of dealing with alien species (okay, that sounds a little on the dull side, but it could have been fascinating); and Worf in a pivotal role, dealing with his somewhat estranged foster brother, Nikolai. Nikolai is played by Paul Sorvino, which should mean that even if this is a snooze fest, you have ample opportunity to make *Goodfellas* jokes whenever Paulie is on screen. Here's the sad part: While I recognized Sorvino, I didn't remember the *Goodfellas* connection until just now. That's 40 minutes worth of bad-joke opportunities wasted.

Back on point, "Homeward" has elements for success. But it just doesn't work, primarily because the conflicts are minimized in ways that remove the majority of their tension; any suspense left behind is a grinding, dull affair, as again and again, we watch people say what needs to be accomplished and then, slowly, do that. There are minor complications, and a suicide (which is only the second we've had on the series, I think, unless you count the end of ["The Child,"](#) and who wants to do that?), but it's all surface chatter. Nothing here has any emotional weight or real significance; it copies the attitudes of a great *TNG* episode, but forgets the soul. It doesn't help that Picard is reduced to an authoritative figurehead, spouting regulations at Worf's erring step-relation, but then lacking any means to actually follow through on anything he says. Basically, the episode breaks down to: Nikolai does something that violates Federation ordinance; Picard is upset; Nikolai has a plan that solves everything; Picard fumes some, but they follow the plan; it basically works out. There are problems (like that suicide), and "Homeward" is in some ways about how Nikolai's self-righteousness forces other people to clean up his messes, but it's largely toothless. Which means that I spent most the time trying to get worked up about what was happening on screen, and failing again and again.

Nikolai Rozhenko has been hidden on a science outpost on the pre-space (and most other) technology Boraal 2. But the planet is in crisis, as the atmosphere has become unstable; vicious electrical storms will render the surface uninhabitable in a matter of days. The *Enterprise* arrives to get Nikolai and his records off the planet, but when Worf beams down, he finds his brother has made contact with a village of Boraalans, and led them underground to protect them from the storms. He hasn't told them everything about himself (and he doesn't intend to), but he is determined to save them. He makes his case to Picard, and Picard, citing the PD, refuses. So Nikolai beams the colony aboard the ship onto the holodeck, and then trusts the merciful judgment of the *Enterprise* senior staff to help him complete his plan anyway. This works out well for him.

It's strange how easily Nikolai is able to beam a group of 30 or so people onto the ship, and take over a holodeck in the process. The show hand-waves it by having Nikolai fake a disturbance related to Boraal's storms in order to hide the energy surge, but you'd think there'd be some kind of child-proof lock on the teleporters. But that's not the issue here. The issue is that once Nikolai goes through with his plan, he suffers no consequences for his rash behavior. If this episode is intended partly as a debate about the necessity (or lack thereof) of the Prime Directive, it's a pretty one-sided debate at best. Picard and Troi talk in concepts, theories, vague imperatives, while Nikolai has a group of people who would die if they weren't helped. Yes, you can't save everyone, but the episode never gets around to giving us clear reasons why you can't. Or even why this particular adventure is so ill-advised. Nikolai even winds up

marrying a Boraalan (she's pregnant with his child, which may hurt President Palmer's chance for re-election); Worf argues with him over this, but finally capitulates with a sort of "That's so Nikolai!" shrug.

"Homeward" attempts to generate suspense by having the holodeck on the fritz, constantly threatening Nikolai and Worf's efforts to provide the colonists with a smooth transition to their new home. (Nikolai's plan: Use the holodeck to re-create the Boraalan caves so the Boraalans never realize they've left their planet. Then find a planet capable of supporting them, and program the holodeck to simulate a journey to this new terrain, beaming them down once the transition is complete. It's actually fairly ingenious, and makes you wonder if the less scrupulous scientists in the Federation haven't considered using holodecks for similar, if less well-intentioned, ruses.) The two stepbrothers handle any difficulties that arise easily, and the Boraalans arrive at their destination none the wiser, with only a single casualty. It's difficult to walk away from all this and still think the Directive is as indisputable a good as the rest of the series argues. That's fine, if that's the intent, but there are no ramifications suggested here. While the crew acknowledges they're glad they saved the Boraalans in the end, there's no, "Well, what does this all mean for our guiding principle?" comment. That's because the situation is a closed loop, the number of conditions required to create it complex enough that it has little to no bearing on general behavior. Which makes for some lackluster drama.

The only way this might have worked is if we were given more reason to give a damn about the Boraalans. As is, they're generic, which makes Nikolai's arguments that they should be saved for their vital culture harder to swallow. (But then, given that he's knocked one of them up, I doubt his reasoning is grounded by solid, logical thinking.) The only one we really get to know is Vorin, the chronicler who represents the episode's only serious attempt at a counter to Nikolai's demands. Through a computer glitch, Vorin finds his way off the holodeck (this is ridiculous, by the way; why wouldn't Worf, Picard, or Riker—or anyone with a modicum of sense—have set up a guard or two outside the door?), wanders into Ten Forward, and learns the truth. Picard tries to break the news to him as gently as possible, but Vorin can't handle it. Faced with a choice between returning to his people and keeping his experiences a secret, or making a new life in the Federation, Vorin kills himself. So, you see, Nikolai's planning wasn't perfect, and there was a cost, which means the Prime Directive isn't completely pointless.

Except, one life to save 30 or so others isn't the worst math in the world, especially since Vorin would've died either way. (Picard mourns that he died alone and afraid, and yes, that is sad, but the "alone" is a good thing.) More than that, though, is the unspoken condescension in this entire plotline. Vorin isn't a character with a personality; he's an idealized concept, the Native Artist, and his death is as meaningless as his life. Beyond the shock of a suicide on such a generally optimistic show, there's little emotional impact here, and I'm troubled by Vorin's assumption that his people couldn't "handle" the knowledge of the Enterprise. We know so little about Boraalan culture that there's no context in which to place his assumption, and it also makes you think about how much effort is expended here to coddle and protect an alien race from the "shock" of interstellar contact. Vorin is, I suspect, intended as representative of what might have happened if Nikolai and Worf's attempts at concealment had failed, but the episode fails to make its case successfully. Instead, it offers a wish fulfillment scenario in which a deluded, arrogant do-gooder decides he wants to save the world—and does.

Grade: C+

Stray observations:

- We don't even see Nikolai's reaction to Vorin's death. The only time he mentions it, he mostly seems happy he can take the chronicler's place.
- It doesn't help that the Enterprise crew is largely stripped of its autonomy here, reduced to playing second fiddle to Nikolai's plots.

- It's fun seeing Michael Dorn nearly out of make-up.
- If you're curious about the "President Palmer" joke, Nikolai's lady friend is played by Penny Johnson Jerald, who played the much despised Sherry Palmer in the first three seasons of *24*.
- To speed the Boraalans to their new home, Picard orders the *Enterprise* to go to maximum warp. Which means what, now?
- "It is a sign of La Forge."

"Sub Rosa" (season 7, episode 14; first aired January 29, 1994)

Or *The One Where Ugh. Just Ugh.*

All right, this one hurt. So it's time to switch back to my favorite coping mechanism, the note-based review. Here are (with annotations and a few minor corrections) my thoughts as jotted down while watching "Sub Rosa." The screams from a damned soul are implied.

Crusher's grandmother's funeral

We open in a cemetery, as Beverly gives a eulogy for a woman we've never heard mentioned before, Felisa "Nana" Howard. It's an idyllic scene, in that it's obviously a set modeled to look like something out of *The Quiet Man*, and there isn't anything immediately unsettling about it. The episode should have started with Patrick Stewart in front of a red curtain, warning us that the hour to follow would feature scenes not fit for human consumption. A real missed opportunity there.

A handsome man drops a camellia on the coffin, and gives Beverly a sexy look. Strap in!

At this point, I like to think I was still laughing with the episode, not at it. Still, this the first official warning sign that we're leaving behind science fiction, and heading into Lifetime Original Movie territory.

Picard and Governor Maturin get us up to speed on the colony.

Caldos—terraforming project

The place was built to look like the Scottish highlands.

Okay, so I was a little premature in the *Quiet Man* reference; this is Scottish, not Irish. There's something very old-school *Trek* about the effort to recreate a familiar Earth environment, and it adds to the feeling, throughout the episode, that this is really just someone's attempt to shoehorn their favorite genre into a series that can't support it. (Although really, "Sub Rosa" gets so bad you can't really blame it on genre problems.)

They walk over and stand in front of a fence. Seriously?

The blocking here isn't very good, is what I'm saying.

"Your grandmother had remarkable green eyes." Troi says this like it's the greatest miracle of the world.

I'm sure the eyes are impressive, and I'm also sure Troi is just trying to find something nice to say, but really, this line is only here to set up for a payoff later in the episode. If you hear this and don't immediately think, "I wonder when Beverly's eyes will turn green," you should probably watch more scary movies.

Nana raised Beverly after her mother died.

A magic candle.

Oh, "Sub Rosa," you can pretend all you like that this has a rational explanation, but I know a damn magic candle when I see one.

Beverly deals with her grief by randomly pawing through her grandmother's stuff.

I'm being mean here, I think—anyone visiting the home of a recently deceased, much beloved relative would be

interested in a bit of snooping. But this goes on for a while, and, like much of the episode, it's awkward. Like maybe someone is trying to build suspense, but doesn't quite grasp how to go about it.

Of course there's a journal.

Because of course there is.

Old guy just wanders in and blows the candle out. Beverly is upset.

Ned Quint, the creepy caretaker. "Ach, there's lots of things she dinna talk about!" PS There's a death curse.

If you haven't seen any of the early *Friday The 13th* movies, this won't mean much to you, but Ned Quint is a Crazy Ralph stand-in, the elderly nutter who likes to wander in at the beginning of the movie and tell everyone they're doomed, DOOOOOOOMED. Much like Crazy Ralph, Our Ned can neither clearly articulate the reasoning behind his warning, nor is he able to express himself in a way which is not deeply creepy and/or annoying. Also like Ralph, Ned isn't long for this world.

I'm also curious as to why he's so worked up here. Nana died after passing the century mark, and there's never any indication that her association with Tall, Dark, and Spectral had a visibly negative effect on her. I get that we're supposed to think it did, but for all we know, she spent her autumn years having ghost sex and died mid-orgasm. (Sorry for that image.)

The Governor hanging out with Data and Geordi in Engineering. Worried about the "caber toss."

GET IT? IT'S RUSTIC. (Oh, and something something Caldos has some problems in its weather-control systems.)

Nana was 100 years old and was nailing a guy in his 30s, Ronin.

Beverly and Deanna both think this is tops. I'll just move on. It gets worse.

The candle comes back to light. And a ghost starts stripping Beverly. Wow.

Keep going.

"He knew exactly how I liked to be touched." Oh sweet God.

I know. But keep going.

OH MY GOD. She fell asleep reading about her grandmother nailing a guy, and she considers this "erotic."

This. Oh lord, this. I guess attitudes are a lot more cavalier in the future about sex and so forth, which is great, but the idea of Beverly reading her grandmother's account of hot, December-Dawn of Time romance in bed, and, y'know, getting off on this, is far more terrifying than any of the intentional scares this episode has to offer. Nana basically raised Beverly as her own child, which means she's closer to Beverly's mother. If I found a secret stash of my dad's pornographic recollections, I'd burn the site, salt the earth, and never speak to him again. But maybe that's just me.

A bunch of new flowers appear on the grave. And flashing green light. Gardening Tommyknockers!

[Obligatory Stephen King reference]

Problems with the weather-control system.

One of the (many) goofy elements of "Sub Rosa" is the way it keeps throwing in sci-fi elements while Beverly is off at the Spooky Sexcapades. If anything, these signs drag the episode down even farther. Ronin and his seduction attempts are awful, but they're mesmerizingly, hilariously awful. The sci-fi stuff is, by comparison, tame and rather half-assed. (Although the two plots come together gloriously in the climax. Oh God, I said "climax.")

Beverly goes home. There are flowers and shaking mirrors.

Ghost seduction, step one: Poltergeists are hot.

I think Beverly just orgasmed on screen. Oh lord.
See Step One.

"I love you Beverly. Just as I loved Felisa before you."
Born in 1647 in Glasgow on Earth, first fell in love with Jessel Howard, has been haunting-and-nailing her descendants ever since.

This isn't romantic. How is this romantic? "Your mom was hot, as was her mom before her, and her mom's mom, and so forth. You are now part of the great chain. The great chain of me fog-banging red-heads till their eyes turn green."

I think Beverly is orgasming through this entire exposition scene.

Oddly, this doesn't make the scene more fun to watch. It just makes me feel bad for her. Really, how is this not rape? And yet it's played for romance, even with the spookiness. The romantic genre often exploits unsettling gender politics for fantasy purposes, but the "have cake/eat too" strategy here is wrongheaded and insulting. Ronin uses his powers to bend Beverly to his will, and he's still presented as a somewhat sympathetic figure, as though it would've been worth it to her to spend the remainder of her years camped out in the faux-Scottish countryside as the misty finger puppet of a being whose only interest in her is instinctual. Again: This isn't romance, and all the gasps and wide-eyes and blowing wind won't change that.

Poor, poor Gates McFadden. This is embarrassing.

Troi spends a lot of the episode hearing about Beverly's adventures from the sidelines. I wonder if Marina Sirtis was gloating, just a little.

Back on the ship, Beverly seems perfectly fine. Because now she's nailing a ghost.

This is such a weird jump. One scene, she's terrified and wracked with ecstasy in her grandmother's house, the next, she's on the *Enterprise*, with nary a word about what happened. Is this mind control? Is she just so hot for the Grab-Ass Ghost that she's willing to overlook her doubts? Not a clue.

"I'm not seeing anybody." Literally!

Past Zack, you are one funny son of a bitch.

This is basically just a direct-to-video erotic thriller with all the skin edited out.

You're also very insightful. Are you seeing anyone?

Ground fog on the bridge. "It just sort of rolled in on us, sir."

Confession: this made me laugh.

Ned, the comical ethnic stereotype, tries to shut down the weather-control system, dies.

What? How did he—what was he—but if he knew enough to know the weather-control system was a threat, why wouldn't he just tell—screw it. Don't care.

Energy residual. Ew. He was killed by ghost discharge.

[Slowly backs away]

Ronin shows up in the flesh and gropes Beverly. "I need you to help me."

Ah, and now we have Ronin in the flesh. Who looks like basically every other male dreamboat on the show, excluding Billy Campbell—a perfect marriage of father figure and sensitive artist, with a dash of stern violin instructor. And the high forehead just means his hairline recedes from the intensity of his eyes.

"I can't do it for long." Well, there goes the dream-lover status.

Ooo, good burn, Past Zack. Temporal paradox high five!

He wants the candle lit again. This is embarrassing.

I actually don't remember exactly why I thought this was embarrassing, but I have faith in Past Zack. Besides, if embarrassment was riches, "Sub Rosa" would be the 1 percent.

They're not even kissing! They're just mouthing at each other!

Love In The Time Of The Junior High School Dance: Passion Never Dies, Is Also A Little Icky

Back on the Enterprise, Beverly lights the candle, and is clearly, very nervous and excited and this is so weird.

Speaking of junior high, Beverly acts like a teenager really, really, really hoping that guy in her chemistry class wasn't just screwing with her when he asked for her phone number. I'll give "Sub Rosa" credit that at this point we're supposed to find this unsettling, but it's still painfully campy, and insulting to the character. Troi is the only other person on the show I can think of who was this thoroughly mind-screwed. (Riker was brainwashed by the Game, but he was never this subservient, which is telling, and more than a little sad. Apparently, the TNG folks think "romance" for the ladies is "desperation to please a man.")

"I'm going to be part of you Beverly, would you like that?" "Yes, more than anything."

If Beverly had turned into the Gatekeeper at this point, I would've give "Sub Rosa" so many A pluses.

Beverly wants to quit Starfleet, stay on Caldos, dedicate her life to ghost-fucking.

And they say The American Dream is dead.

Geordi and Data in the graveyard at night, looking for an energy rating concentrated on Felisa's grave.

I suppose Past Zack should've kept more specific notes about the actual plot, but I think we should all be grateful he was still awake. The cocaine budget for TV Club reviewers is lower than you'd think.

"Oh, Ronin."

Again, don't remember this part. Just going to assume another orgasm here.

Picard comes by, sees Beverly orgasming lightly by the fire.

I was right! Also, ugh. (Note: This is where a solid "Are you the Keymaster?" would've really saved the day.)

Ronin killed Felisa. He attacks Picard. This is terribly exciting.

You can assume the "exciting" is sarcastic.

Picard sends Beverly after Ronin. Why? Wouldn't he know that's dangerous?

Here's where the episode's attempts to be a sort of gothic mystery really fall down. Picard knows Ronin is dangerous, considering that Ronin just nearly killed him. He also knows that Beverly is at least somewhat under the creature's sway. The logical thing would be to call up to the *Enterprise*, have a security team beam down to escort her to the cemetery. Sure, it might not have helped, but at least it would've made more sense than a solo mission. But because the story requires Beverly to confront Ronin alone, nobody plays it smart.

Ronin JUST INHABITED FELISA'S CORPSE! AND THEN SHE KNOCKS OUT DATA AND GEORDI! THERE AREN'T ENOUGH CAPITAL LETTERS IN THE WORLD FOR THIS SHIT!

I'm not going to lie. This was pretty amazing.

"There's no such thing as a ghost. You are some kind of anaphasic life form!" Wow, sci-fi tech doesn't make for a good dramatic reveal.

I'm also not sure how important the distinction is, although I guess it gives Beverly the courage to fight back.

Beverly, BLOW OUT THE DAMN CANDLE. How stupid ARE YOU?

She shoots it with a phaser. Okay, at least that wasn't stupid.

I'm sorry Past Zack ever doubted you, Beverly. Although he does have a point—why didn't you blow out the candle before you destroyed it? I hope it wasn't just to milk the suspense; you can't milk a dead cow.

"Somehow he realized one of my ancestors had a biochemistry that was compatible with his energy matrix."
Oh, that old saw.

"Whatever else he might have done, he made her very happy."

Argh. Why this tagline? Why do we have to soften a ghost story? A rapist-ghost story? Because the point here is that he made her happy, Beverly. He made her, under false pretenses and without giving her a choice. Sure, he was some kind of crazy alien being that had to exploit something in the Howard DNA to maintain structural integrity, but that doesn't make him a nice guy.

Final thoughts: This was bad. Let us never speak of it again.

Grade: D

Next Week: We take a trip into the "Lower Decks" to help wash away the bad memories, and decide to be true to "Thine Own Self."

Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Lower Decks”/“Thine Own Self”



[Zack Handlen](#)

[11/03/11 10:00am](#)

“Lower Decks” (season 7, episode 15; first aired: Feb. 5, 1994)

Or The One Where The Extras Have Lines

Supposedly, there are hundreds of people aboard the *Enterprise*. We hear this referenced every now and again, whenever someone in command is struggling with the weight of his or her responsibility, or if Picard is trying to convey how it would be very bad indeed if his ship were to blow up. The existence of those hundreds is a statistic I’ve internalized, about as much as it’s possible to internalize a statistic, but even with all the extras flitting through the corridors and occasionally paying the ultimate price in the name of planet-jumping, it’s easy to forget that the seven or eight members of the ensemble we see on a semi-weekly basis aren’t the only ones on the ship. Admittedly, yes, there is no real “ship” here, because this is all a fictional construct. We see the scenes we see, and there’s nothing actually going on around them, which means, for all intents and purposes, there really are only seven or eight people on this show, surrounded by a small cast of rotating extras. And yet *TNG* is a world-building show, so even if those hundreds and hundreds puttering about on the lower decks (episode title!) don’t have an actual presence, we need to believe they’re there.

This can be tricky to pull off, but I think the series has managed well enough. It helps to have a fairly deep ensemble, and *TNG* has made an effort to fill in the background with occasional details that imply a larger context. Like, say, the crew evaluation chat between Riker and Troi that begins “Lower Decks.” We’ve had scenes like this before, and it’s always fascinating to me how much they show that the chummy, we’re-all-hanging-out-for-the-greater-good relationship that much of the senior staff share isn’t something that necessarily trickles down to

everyone else. The not-so-senior members of the crew are friendly with each other, but they are also, for the most part, stressed and worried about their jobs. With the show's regulars, career concerns arise from time to time, but these are people who are largely confident in their roles. No one is tensely angling for a promotion, like Sam and Sito are at the start of "Decks." It's not that Worf expects to be chief of security for the rest of his life, but it's a good gig; he's proven his competence, and in a few years, he'll presumably have a chance for a higher rank. Just like Riker will, if he ever decides he's ready, have that captaincy.

It's different when you're just starting out, though. Confidence takes time to develop, and that time can be stressful, unsettling, and downright unpleasant. "Decks" gives us a glimpse into the lives of young men and women who are trying to prove to themselves and each other that they belong on the *Enterprise*. There's Sam Lavelle, a human overachiever convinced that Riker has a grudge against him; Taurik, a Vulcan working in Engineering who's having a hard time bonding with Geordi La Forge; the human Nurse Alyssa Ogawa, who we've seen before (and who, for what it's worth, doesn't seem all that stressed about her job, given her friendship with Beverly Crusher); and last, and most importantly, the Bajroan Sito Jaxa, who we last saw in ["The First Duty."](#) (There's also Ben, a waiter in Ten Forward, but he doesn't do a whole lot.) None of these characters have the range of movement and freedom we've come to take for granted following the main ensemble, and the episode by and large plays fair with this restriction; we have the luxury of following the entire group, but we're rarely privy to any information that none of them are privy to (beyond, of course, our own accumulated knowledge from watching the series as a whole), which is always fun. Withholding key pieces of plot until the last minute is a key part of storytelling, but usually, we don't know what we don't know because Picard and the others don't know it either. Here, what would be the main storyline takes place behind the scenes till roughly the finally third of the show. Again, this is fun, because it's a change of pace, and it also is a nice bit of world-building because you can extrapolate outward from this episode to every other episode of the series. For most of the crew of the *Enterprise*, every mission is like this.

All that really happens here is that Joret Dal, a Cardassian working as a double agent for the Federation gets in a bit of trouble, and has to use the escape pod on his ship. The *Enterprise* picks him up and, in order to get him back into Cardassian territory, they provide him with a pre-distressed shuttle to support a story that he escaped from Starfleet's clutches. Unfortunately, this isn't quite enough of a cover, so Picard asks Ensign Sito to accompany Dal as his prisoner. Once he passes a checkpoint and uses her as proof of his loyalty, he can then eject her back into Federation space with another escape pod. It's a difficult, dangerous plan, and it doesn't turn out well for Sito, but this alone isn't enough to support an entire episode.

What makes "Decks" work as well as it does is that Joret Dal's storyline isn't the episode's only focus. It's background noise for much of the hour; mysterious and curiosity-inducing background noise, but Sam's insecurity, Taurik's efforts to impress Geordi, and Alyssa's relationship concerns are nearly as loud. (Well, maybe not Alyssa's problems. She's not a terrible character, but it's hard to get too worked up about her getting engaged to someone we never see.) Sito is arguably the main character of the episode, but her mission with Dal, and the ultimate result of that mission, don't really happen till near the end. Before then, she's more confident than Sam, but still dealing with her own demons; namely, the incident at Starfleet Academy that nearly ended her career. When she, along with a few other cadets (including Wesley Crusher) attempted to cover up the fact that their risky flight maneuver cost another cadet his life, Picard realized what had happened, and forced them to come clean. Now Sito is working on the *Enterprise*, and Worf has put her in line for a big promotion—except it seems that Picard is still holding a bit of a grudge. He asks her into his ready room, only to rant at her about how he believes she should've been kicked out of Starfleet completely. Things look bad, but then Worf calls Sito aside and challenges her to a combat test in which the only way to win is to call attention to the unfairness of the test. It's almost like he's trying to teach her some kind of lesson...

“Lower Decks” does a good job at establishing the on-going dynamic between the senior bridge crew and the up-and-comers, a dynamic that is by turns paternal, challenging, and even occasionally irritated. (Riker, as is consistent with his character, isn’t a huge fan of some of the more mundane aspects of command.) There’s nothing hugely dramatic about most of this, which helps give it the sense of activity that serves as an undercurrent through all of the ship’s daily routines. Sam realizes he may need to lighten up a bit after a disastrous attempt to bond with Riker in Ten Forward, but the two of them don’t have to face a life-or-death struggle, and there’s no sense that Sam is going to suddenly relax and have all his problems resolved for the rest of his time on the ship. Taurik learns that maybe trying to show off isn’t the best way to ingratiate himself with his boss, but Geordi also comes around on being so standoffish, which is neat. And Alyssa’s boyfriend isn’t cheating on her, but is, in fact, getting ready to propose. Which he does offscreen, which is probably the nicest part about her story.

As for Sito, Picard’s attempts to browbeat her into demonstrating a spine pay off, eventually. That must be the most difficult lesson to teach: that sooner or later, lessons aren’t enough. With a slight push from Worf, Sito gains the necessary self-confidence to meet with Picard again and tell him that either he acknowledge that she’s done good work in the three years since her Academy disgrace, or else transfer her to another ship. This being what Picard was really waiting for all along, Sito’s speech gets her a chance at her first big-time, life-or-death mission. She accepts willingly. And then she dies. Her death is fairly shocking. It happens offscreen, and the crew only learns about it when they find the remains of an escape pod, and learn that the Cardassians are taking credit for killing a fleeing Bajoran. Sito isn’t a regular, of course, and *TNG* hasn’t shied away from sad endings before, but in her short amount of screentime, she was likable, passionate, and smart. She got what she wanted: a chance to be taken seriously, to prove her worth, and to finally put the stigma of her past misdeed permanently behind her. That she dies for it is less a matter of paying a price, and more a matter of the consequences of committing to the life she chose, that nearly everyone on board the *Enterprise* has chosen. And it leads to one of the most moving scenes in the history of the show, as Worf, dealing with his own grief over Sito’s loss, joins the rest of her friends to share in their grief. *TNG* isn’t a grim series by any marker, but its willingness to embrace the fact that no utopian future can completely forestall tragedy makes it a better show. And by presenting us with a slightly different perspective on that tragedy, it shows itself still capable of telling vital, enriching stories in its final season.

Grade: A

Stray observations:

- It seems like every time we’ve seen Geordi in the past few weeks, he’s been in a bad mood about something.
- I’m not sure that learning to point out the unfairness of a test is all that great a lesson. Isn’t part of growing up realizing that most tests are unfair, and that you have to take them anyway?
- I don’t think I’d ever want to be an officer onboard the *Enterprise*.
- Sito’s conversation with Dal, right before they get picked up by the Cardassian authorities, is a nice bonding moment. Which makes the revelation of her death a few minutes later even harsher.
- No joke: the last scene with Worf made me tear up a little.

“Thine Own Self” (season 7, episode 16; first aired: Feb. 12, 1994)

Or The One Where Data Loses His Mind, And Troi Gets Testy

TNG has managed to creep me out before, both intentionally and unintentionally. I’ve been frightened by bizarre, nightmare-inducing aliens; I’ve been made uncomfortable by Data’s behavior; and I’ve been horrified by Lwaxana Troi’s laugh. But I don’t think I’ve been as viscerally unsettled watching the show as I was during “Thine Own Self.” This is an odd episode, although its basic structure—memory loss, stranger in a strange land, outsiders fear

what they don't understand—is familiar to the series, and to science fiction in general. What makes “Thine Own Self” odd is in the margins. Like the subplot with Troi becoming a commander. Or the fact that by the end of the episode, Data has half the face of his skin ripped off, gets stabbed through the chest with an iron rod, and then buried underground by a group of somewhat guilty townsfolk. Or, and here's the bit that really got to me, the sight of ignorant people casually handling radioactive material. One little girl actually wears a piece of the metal as a necklace.

“Thine Own Self” doesn't have the coherency of an episode like “Lower Decks,” but it nearly makes up for this by telling a pair of entertaining, clever vignettes, the first centering on Data encountering difficulties during a fairly routine recovery mission, the second detailing Troi's attempts to pass the Engineering portion of the commanding-officer test. Data's story, which gives the episode its title (you could make an argument that Troi is also being true to her self by following her ambition, but Data's the one who loses his memory), is the main plot, but Troi's is actually one of the best storylines the character has ever had, allowing her to operate in realms beyond the usual spheres of sensing and something. Neither of these plots connect, really, and while I appreciate that the show doesn't try and force thematic resonance where none exists, that lack of connection does make the episode feel a little less than whole. Plus, Data's adventures in Vaguely Renaissance Land come just a hair or two shy of entirely working. Overall, though, this was a solid “B+” of an episode; not a classic, and probably not to all tastes, but just loopy enough to keep me guessing.

When “Thine Own Self” begins, Troi is returning to the *Enterprise* after a school reunion. She finds Beverly on the bridge, and in the course of their short conversation, Troi learns that Data is off on Barkon-4, a planet with a pre-industrial society. A ship bearing radioactive materials crashed on the planet in an unpopulated area, and since radiation doesn't affect Data the way it affects organic life, he's been sent on a solo mission to clean up the crash. Troi also questions Beverly as to what prompts her to volunteer to captain the ship during the night shift, and while Beverly's answer is a good one (because really, if you had the chance to, wouldn't you want to captain a starship?), it's clear that Troi has already got the proverbial bee in her bonnet. Going to her reunion and seeing what her friends have accomplished may have jumpstarted her ambition, but what really got her going on this was back in season five's [“Disaster.”](#) when Troi briefly commanded the *Enterprise* during a, well, disaster. She's ready for the next step, but taking that step isn't as just as easy as wanting to.

It's at this point that our stories split neatly in two. When we first see Data on Barkon-4, an accident has blocked much of his memory. He arrives in town (after a 100 kilometer walk) just in time to meet a local man named Garvin, and his daughter, Gia. Data confesses his lack of memory, and Garvin takes him home, where the town doctor (who isn't exactly a super genius) looks him over and declares that he's an iceman from the mountains. Apart from his clothes, all that Data has with him is a case marked “Radioactive.” Since no one knows what that word means, they decide to open the case to see if it has any clues as to Data's identity inside. Instead, they find a bunch of rocks. Rocks that Garvin sells to the town blacksmith, although he keeps a few for himself. Pretty soon, Garvin starts feeling ill. Sores and burn marks develop on his flesh, and he takes to his bed. Then Gia gets sick. Then the blacksmith. And so on.

There is something deeply and immediately unpleasant about watching Garvin and the others casually toss around radioactive metal, and in its way, it's a great argument for the Prime Directive. The Barkonians are totally unprepared for this kind of danger. Not only do they not recognize radioactivity for what it is, they have no comprehension of the threat it represents, and only the simplest conception of elements and the core substance of the universe. Again and again, the arrogant (but well-meaning) town doctor exposes her ignorance, and it's actually impressive that Data manages to stay on everyone's good side for as long as he does; another character, i.e. someone without Data's lack of anger and innate calm, would've argued harder, and probably gotten stabbed a lot sooner. Sure, if you ignored the Prime Directive, you could try and explain everything about what was happening, as Data

does his best to do, but you can't guarantee that those explanations would go smoothly. Honestly, the biggest lesson to take away from this is that any contact with a civilization that's not ready for outsiders will probably end badly; and even more troublesome, contact is going to happen from time to time, no matter how much you want to prevent it. The best you can hope for is to minimize the danger, which, at its best, is really all the Prime Directive is about.

Meanwhile, Troi is struggling with her exams. It's the Engineering test she can't get a handle on; it takes place on the holodeck, during a simulated ship meltdown, and no matter how many times she takes it, she can't stop the ship from blowing up. It gets to the point that Riker finally tells her he can't test her anymore—he doesn't think she's cut out for command, and this is the kind of test where you can't give someone advice. Either they realize their mistake, or they don't. Finally, a comment about duty gives Troi the answer she needs: She has to be willing to sacrifice a crewmember, even someone she knows and cares about, for the good of the Enterprise. It's a lesson that ties in well with what we saw in "Lower Decks," and one of the overarching themes of the series. The original *Trek* had its deaths, but we never lost anyone we really cared about, and Kirk's grief over a dead red-shirt tended to be contingent on the dictates of the plot. *TNG* is more serious than that. I've said that this is a show about the consequences of crazy science-fiction ideas, and as consequences go, it doesn't get more serious than death. Where *TOS* was pulpy, iconic fun, the writers of *TNG* decided to take the premise as straight-faced and realistically as possible. (For a given value of "realism.") Which means that not every ending is a happy one, and that being in a position of command means being willing to send people to their deaths if need be.

So Troi eventually passes her test, which is nice for her, and Data (who can't remember his actual name and is going around calling himself "Jayden") is trying to figure out why everyone around him is dying. There's some nifty low-tech science here, although I'll leave it to you to determine if any of it would actually work. If I had any problem with this section of the story, it's that, apart from the slow death-by-radiation that hits so many of the townsfolk, there doesn't seem to be a whole lot here that isn't easy to chart out in advance. It's done well, and there are plenty of effective, eerie images here, but the actual Barkonians fail to make much of an impression; apart from the upside down U's they have tattooed on their foreheads, they don't have much in the way to distinguish them from a dozen other races we've seen on the show. But on the plus side, I was impressed at how far "Thine Own Self" was willing to take the paranoia and suspicion of the townsfolk. Seeing Data get Two-Faced was unexpected, and see him get stabbed through the chest and buried was even more so. You could almost imagine this episode playing out with a different, non-starring castmember in Data's role. The memory loss would be harder to explain, but the burial would be a poignant and haunting, as opposed to just a minor inconvenience.

Some episodes are frustrating because they fail to live up to their potential; others are difficult to watch because they had no potential in the first place. "Thine Own Self" is solid. It could've been better, but its flaws aren't so obvious as to be distracting, and not every episode is going to be a classic. Season seven has had a lot of uneven material, so it's comforting to see something like this, an overall unremarkable but still entertaining hour of television, one that offers a few moments of insight and wit, a few memorable images, and doesn't overstay its welcome. Just like this review.

Grade: B+

Stray observations:

- Data schooling the doctor on proper science is all kinds of badass.
- Oh hey, Data got (most) of his memory back. I think these recovery missions could be better managed, honestly. While Data is the only one who can get close enough to the radioactive material to handle it, there's no reason I can think of not sending someone else along to hang back at a safe distance and make sure the android doesn't lose his memory and wander off.

- Strange that Data can remember how to build a microscope, as well as grasp the fundamental principles of science, and still not understand the word “radioactive.”
- Every time someone called Data “Iceman,” I wondered when Goose and Maverick would show up.

Next week: We take a look at what’s beyond those “Masks,” and make the best roll we can against the "Eye Of The Beholder."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Masks”/“Eye Of The Beholder”](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[11/10/11 10:00AM](#)

“Masks” (Season 7, episode 17; first aired: 2/19/1994)

Or The One Where Data Walks Like An Egyptian

When I was a kid, sick days were like a visit to a strange land. A place where it didn’t matter how much I slept, where there were no bells telling me when I had to switch rooms, and no lectures to sit through; a place where I could eat whatever I wanted so long as I drank the mystical draft of “lots of fluids.” Mom and Dad both worked, and while I read a lot as a kid, when I was sick, it was hard to concentrate, so more often than not I’d wind up by myself, on the couch, watching daytime television. That’s when it got really strange. I stayed away from talk shows and judge shows and news programs, but there was plenty to occupy my attention, and I was always fascinated by how all these cartoons and kids’ series could survive, airing as they did during what was normally school hours. There was that gnome cartoon on Nickelodeon, or *The Bionic Five* on one of the local affiliates, or *Eureka’s Castle* which, admittedly, I was too old for but it still had a cool theme song I can remember even to this day. And then there were the shows on PBS. I’m sure they weren’t intended to be terrifying, and I’m sure that if I watched them now, I’d laugh at my fears, but some of the programs on public broadcasting in the late morning and early afternoon scared me for life. Like *Read All About It*, a Canadian educational series that aired in the US when I was eight or nine. It wasn’t supposed to be unbelievably creepy, but looking at the show now (via some heavily pixated videos on YouTube), it still seems nightmarish to me, a Lynchian horror show of baffling, dangerous creatures and the inexplicably chipper children sent to battle them.

I mention this because, hey, I love talking about myself (because I am awesome), but also to try and quantify my reaction to “Masks.” It’s not a great episode. It doesn’t really fit *TNG*, and it doesn’t really make what you’d call “sense.” (Although it does have its own internal logic.) To enjoy the episode requires a willingness not to snicker whenever Data speaks riddles in a funny voice—although I suppose if you do snicker, you’re getting some kind of

enjoyment out of this. I'm not sure what to make of all of it, is my point, and after doing this so long, that's unusual in and of itself. "Masks" is loopy, and while it never reaches the surreal, eerie heights of my childhood memories of *Read All About It*, it seems to be operating in that same unnerving frame of reference. Bad things happen, and the only way to deal with those bad things is to play by their rules, and even then, nobody knows exactly what's going on. If I'd seen this twenty years ago with a bit of cold medication in my veins, it would almost certainly have traumatized me for life.

The plot, near as I can make it: the *Enterprise* comes across a rogue comet and moves in to do some science-related investigating. After Data starts a scan, there's a flash of light, and the android is briefly confused. Not enough for anyone to notice, but soon, his work in sculpture class takes on significantly more abstract qualities than before. Strange objects start appearing on the ship—statues and blocks covered in hieroglyphic symbols, symbols which soon enough start taking over the *Enterprise*'s computers. Then Data busts out the multiple personalities. He talks in strange voices about people no one on the *Enterprise* has heard of before, and he warns Picard (in the guise of "That," a personality that comes off like Data's brother Lore, only slightly less of a jerk) that "Masaka is coming." Realizing the disturbance is coming from inside the comet, Picard has Worf fire into the comet's center, revealing an alien ship. (It looks like something left behind after an aborted game of Jenga.) The insides of the *Enterprise* continue to change, and what was a curiosity becomes a very real danger. Picard and the others have to decipher the messages Schizoid Data is passing on, and find some way to deal with "Masaka," before their ship is swallowed up completely.

That about sums it up, at least right up till the ending, but I'm not sure any summary could convey just how bizarre all of this is. Data's personality shifts are one thing. Brent Spiner isn't always the most subtle of actors, but I thought he actually did a decent job here. It helps that his role is basically impossible; he's called on to create multiple characters with only his voice and mannerisms, from a barely-defined culture (Mayan-Egyptian-ish?), as well as provide the episode's only source of contact with the alien threat. No one discovers a group of recordings in the other ship, there's no ancient caretaker (or real Masaka) who shows up to rasp threats at our heroes. It's all Data, all the time with a side order of intruding geography. The fact that Spiner makes it the full episode and stays committed to the premise throughout is impressive enough on its own, let alone the fact that he often makes it work, at least better than it has any right working. This is very silly stuff, but when Data gasps, "Masaka is coming," or rasps like a dying old man, it's... well, it's not incredibly ridiculous. Which by every right it should be, frankly.

Then there's the weird cosmology behind the alien ship's invasions. I've been reading up on Philip K. Dick lately (I'm doing a thing at a comic convention this weekend in Portland) (neerrrrrrrd), and all the references to Masaka and That and Korgano remind me of Dick's increasingly complicated and, quite frankly, insane conception of the foundation of the universe. Or really, any particularly left field religious history—it's that feeling of people juggling ideas that aren't really based off of any visible, definable concepts, connecting them with their own tenuous narrative logic. This stuff makes my head hurt, although nothing here comes close to *VALIS* levels of mind-melting. Ostensibly, Picard is just going along with what Data tells him; since the *Enterprise* lacks the tools to effectively combat the alien ship (in that the alien ship keeps taking those tools away), the captain has to beat them at their own game. And there's something charming in watching Picard fight fire with fire, especially given his long established love of archaeology. There's a part of him that clearly lives for this shit, studying the designs on the alien structures, trying to piece together what they might mean, and, finally, using those symbols to create his own method of stopping the threat.

"Masks" does its best to keep things interesting, although it doesn't entirely succeed. The problem here, for me, is that there's no real core to any of this. There are cool bits here and there, like the photon torpedo that gets filled with snakes before Worf and Geordi can fire it, or the fact that the alien objects appearing in the *Enterprise* aren't being beamed over, but actually transmuted from material already on board the ship. And there are weird bits that, at the

very least, offer some solid “the hell?” value. Like the chest plate on Data’s uniform that changes every time he shifts between personalities, or, hell, the whole bizarre narrative of Masaka, who is some kind of goddess, and she does awful things to anyone who wrongs her, and only Korgano can stop her. In order to save the *Enterprise*, Picard summons Masaka and pretends to be Korgano, convincing Masaka to go back to sleep so they can go on the hunt again. Or something like that. I get frustrated by backstories that refuse to make intuitive sense, so I tend to get lost very quickly.

That’s what kept me from having as much fun with “Masks” as I wanted to. I’ve heard comments for and against this episode, and it’s not hard to see either side of the argument. If you can really get behind the crazy, oddly haunting vibe the episode is intent on putting out, this is a fascinating anomaly; just because it isn’t the sort of story *TNG* usually tries to tell doesn’t make it inherently bad. But on the other hand, you really, really need to be on the episode’s wave-length for this to work for you, and it’s a kind of wave-length I don’t think *TNG* has ever really prepared us for. We’ve had mysterious alien races, sure, but in those confrontations, the point was to try and find common ground before moving forward. In “Masks,” Picard simply does his best to play Masaka’s game just long enough to be rid of her. That makes for a hollow story, one that lacks much of anything in the way of an emotional component or, to be honest, a significant threat. For all of that’s doom and gloom, Masaka turns out to be a big bowl of not much, and the episode’s commitment to following the alien ship’s mythology makes everything else disconnected and surreal. I was terrified by *Read All About It* because there was just enough realness there to make me feel personally threatened by what I was seeing, suggesting that the irrational was always possible, no matter how much I might want to believe otherwise. “Masks” is all irrational, and without that context, once you remove the surface, there’s nothing underneath.

Grade: C

Stray observations:

- “The question is, can we trust a personality from an alien archive that seems bent on taking us over?” I am %99 convinced this line appears somewhere in PKD’s *Exegesis*.
- “Animals are worshipped in many cultures.” You think?
- Picard decides they need to fight fire with fire. He inputs the symbols they’ve found into the ship’s computers, and the ship synthesizes a mask. Picard picks it up. Riker says, “Another mask.” Thanks, Riker! (Also, why the hell is he saying “another”? Data only made one mask in his pottery class near the beginning of the episode, and he doesn’t wear it until the next scene. Unless Will is being all metaphorical.)

“Eye Of The Beholder” (Season 7, episode 18; first aired: 2/26/1994)

Or The One Where Troi And Worf Make Out, Sort Of But Not Really

First off, apologies; for some reason last week when I was finishing my review, I thought we’d be looking at “Genesis” after “Masks,” because either I can’t read, or else I really wanted to do a terrible joke about prog rock. We’ll get to “Genesis” next week, but now it’s time for “Eye Of The Beholder,” a thoroughly mediocre episode in which the only interesting character dynamic is the one ultimately proven to be entirely fictional. More fictional than usual, I mean. As in, fictional within the context of a fictional reality, and oh lord now we’re back on the crazy train.

Which is, I guess, somewhat appropriate. “Eyes” is a more traditional *TNG* episode than “Masks,” and it all holds together by the end in terms that don’t require us to take a few hits of mescaline beforehand just to grasp them. Still, though, it’s a bit of a mind-flip, ending with a last minute twist that renders roughly half (or more) of the episode essentially irrelevant. The show has gone down the “It was all in my mind!” path before, most effectively with [“The Inner Light,”](#) and “Eye” isn’t operating on that level. It’s a trifle unfair to expect it to, but “Eye” meets only the bare minimum requirement for this kind of storyline. Troi has significant experiences that create the illusion that she’s

living out days, while she's actually standing frozen for a matter of seconds. She also does things during those experiences which seem to contradict what we know about her character, as well as threatening to destroy the status quo of the series. Which is why you play these mind games, really; if you're going to spend a good deal of time trapped inside one character's hallucination, you better damn well take advantage of the opportunities this raises. Let's have Troi and Worf have sex! And then Troi can be psycho jealous! And then she can shoot Worf and decide to kill herself!

Wacky, right? Only, not really, since none of it means anything, and even as it's happening, it's hard to take it too seriously. The stakes here, for all of Worf and Troi's canoodling, are laughable low, and what's odd is that we don't really realize how low they are until the very end. The event with the most consequence in the entire episode happens during the cold open, when an ensign kills himself in one of the *Enterprise's* nacelles. It's a shocking moment (although not that shocking; this is probably my own fault, since I'd read the episode was about the investigation of a suicide, but it's hard to get worked up about a strange character dying bloodlessly in the first five minutes), and, more importantly, it's the only thing that happens. Seriously, if you stripped away Troi's brain trip, you get: ensign kills himself. Troi and Worf investigate. They find out there were some murders, and the imprint of a suicide is what drove the ensign to his death. Fin. The crime isn't even something that needs to be solved. Sure, the families of the victims may have their grief soothed by a psychic vision imprinted on a plasma coil by a suicidal murderer, but the murderer is dead, and the event that killed the ensign is probably not going to come up again. Maybe now they put a sign in the nacelle that says, "WARNING: BAD VIBES. DO NOT BE PSYCHIC HERE."

There's just not really enough here to warrant a full episode, which is probably why the fantasy Worf/Troi relationship gets thrown in. The way Troi's hallucination works, nothing romantic that passes between the two characters actually happened, which means that momentary excitement from seeing some Betazed/Klingon love is all for naught. (This show must've been hell on 'shippers. I can't think of a single romantic relationship that's developed between main characters at any point in the series. Sure, Riker and Troi have a past, but that's been largely pushed to the side.) Sure, it implies that on some level, Troi was thinking about hooking up with Worf. The hallucination provides her with a template, but she's the one who fills in the specifics, and when it comes to choosing a lover to drive her insane with jealousy, she goes with Worf, not Riker. Putting this together with "Parallels" means that *somebody* on the writing staff wants these crazy kids together, but at this point, they either need to make it happen in actual continuity, or let the idea go. That's two teases in a row, and it's getting ridiculous.

While I was initially a fan of the possibilities Tworf represented, I'm no longer quite so enthusiastic. It's a chemistry problem. The scene in "Eye" when Worf and Troi first hold hands and then passionately embrace and start making out is, if I'm remembering correctly, the most awkward, unconvincing moment of romantic surrender I've seen in the entire run of the show. And TNG has never been good at this stuff. Michael Dorn and Marina Sirtis both give it their best, but it's painful to watch. It gets a little better as it goes, but it never comes across as even remotely natural, and that's a problem. Relationships need to have some reason for existing, even if that reason is as simple as, "I wanna hit that." There's no sense of an overwhelming sexual desire between Troi and Worf, which means there has to be chemistry and affection to push them towards creating desire. And it simply isn't there. You could argue that it doesn't really need to be, given that all of this is happening in Troi's mind. It's not actually real, so why should it look real? But since Troi's creating all of this in response to outside stimulus, it should seem like a natural development. That it doesn't means it's easier to be suspicious when Troi starts acting jealous, and it also throws doubt on the viability of Troi and Worf dating in "real" life.

The problem is that *TNG*, despite its nominal efforts to project a future where sex exists without prejudice or judgment, has largely stripped its cast of its sexuality. These people seem like a bunch of genial brothers and sisters hanging out together on a farm that just happens to be moving through space. Generally, that's fine; there's a strong feeling of community and mutual trust that runs through the series' best seasons, and it helps make this an

environment an audience wants to return to. But when it comes for actual screwing, well, remember that scene in *Back To The Future* when Lea Thompson jumps Michael J. Fox while they're parked outside the Enchantment Under The Sea dance? "Kissing you is like kissing my brother." Pretty much. Effective romantic entanglements was never a tone *TNG* really got a handle on, even if it had its occasional successes, and "Eye" is a good example of why.

You'll notice I'm not really discussing the plot of the episode, but as mentioned, there isn't much plot to discuss. Once upon a time, back when the Enterprise was being built, a crazy guy caught his girlfriend cheating on him. They laughed at him (which is, murdering aside, amazingly dickish), and he snapped and killed them both, before throwing himself into a plasma stream. It's a little odd that nobody on the *Enterprise* had heard of this incident (well, nobody in command). I doubt there are that many crimes of passion in the Federation, especially not ones that happen during ship construction. Really, though, this isn't anything I can get worked up about, because we know nothing about any of the people involved. This isn't even a stupid ghost story. No one's spirit needs to be put to rest. Troi gets her head screwed on sideways for a while, and then Worf stops her from jumping into the plasma, and that's it.

Which leaves me time to poke holes in the rest of the episode. Like the fact that Troi's hallucination involves visions of scenes she's not actually present for. Or the way Ensign Kwan's suicide is handled. It's not a bad cold open, starting with the action already in progress, but I'm not sure the standard "I'm going to talk him down from the ledge" approach is really the right call here. For one thing, why the hell wasn't Troi around from the start? This sort of situation is arguably one of the primary reasons she's on board the ship in the first place. (I'll tell you why she wasn't there: her psychic abilities would've set off the vision the same way Kwan's did, and the episode would've been much shorter.) Aren't there ways to beam someone out of one part of the ship to a different part of the ship? Okay, let's assume the plasma is disrupting the transport beam. Why doesn't Riker just tackle the guy? Then there's the cavalier way Kwan's supposed girlfriend handles his death. For all she knows it's a suicide, which is a painful, ugly way to lose a loved one, which leads to a lot of ragged edges and awkward emotions. And yet, Ensign Calloway seems mildly sad, at worst. Like she's thinking back to when her puppy died when she was ten, rather than the sudden, violent death of someone she cared about.

All in all, for an episode with such a big twist, this one doesn't bother to go anywhere worthwhile. The murder-suicide that drives the plot is barest glean of a cliché, with no real supporting background to give it depth. Troi and Worf's "relationship" is cringe-inducing. And in the end, we learn that none of it really mattered in the first place. Flawed as it is, I'd take the ambitiously ridiculous "Masks" over a meandering mess like this any day.

Grade: C-

Stray Observations:

- Worf's ultra-serious, "Yes. Yes, I too have sought visions in fire" was legitimately hilarious.

Next week: We finally behold the glory of "Genesis," and take one step closer to our "Journey's End."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Genesis”/“Journey’s End”](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[11/17/11 10:00AM](#)

“Genesis” (season 7, episode 19; originally aired: 3/19/94)

Or The One Where Worf Sprays Beverly With His Venom Sac And No I Am Not Kidding

I’m not sure if anyone’s noticed, but these reviews have been getting shorter as we approach the end of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Given that my regular review length tends to be a tad on the self-indulgent side, I really shouldn’t see this as a problem, but it does bother me a little. Partly it’s because I’ve stretched myself too thin this fall, and when I get tired, it gets that much harder for me to find clever ways of poking holes in the adventures of Captain Picard and friends. But if that was the only reason—hell, if that was even the main reason—then it wouldn’t be happening with such regularity. The real issue here is that the worse the show gets, the more difficult it is for me to find ways to comment on it without either repeating what I’ve said in the past, or just giving in to outright sarcasm. The former would be pointless, and the latter, while initially entertaining, would get old fast. (I’m just not funny enough to sustain a season-long riffing session.) Once upon a time, bad episodes could inspire as much passion in me as good ones, because it’s fascinating to understand what separates a failed hour of television from a successful, or even passably mediocre one. But with hours like “Genesis” and “Journey’s End,” I’m sorely tempted to just shrug, roll my eyes, and move on.

Sadly for us all, I doubt my overlords would pay for me for contempt alone, so I’ve got to muster up a few words for “Genesis,” a very silly, irritatingly lazy episode of the “Crazy stuff happens to the crew!” variety. (And for what it’s worth, I don’t include the above as a complaint, or not exactly—I think it’s as much a commentary on the episodes as the reviews themselves that I’m, if not actively dreading the show now, then at least not embracing it with the excitement I once did. If I had to characterize season seven in one word, that word would be “flailing.” There have been a few good-to-great episodes in here, but for the most part, it’s almost like we’re stuck back in the first season,

when no one working on the show had any idea what kind of stories they wanted to tell. Only now, it's more a matter of creative ennui than confusion.) There are a few fun bits scattered here and there throughout the episode, but the ridiculous central concept, combined with an ending that doesn't so much justify what just happened as it does flip off the audience and dare them to object, doesn't make for good *Trek*. Or good anything, really.

The plot wouldn't be out of place in a *Captain Planet* episode: While Picard and Data are off in a shuttlecraft to pick up a rogue torpedo, the crew of the *Enterprise* begin acting strangely. Worf becomes more violent and intense, snapping at his fellow officers and leering at the womenfolk; Troi is convinced the temperature controls on the ship are off, as she's constantly cold and thirsty; and Riker starts doing some third thing that, um, wait, it's on the tip of my tongue... (He's forgetful and slow-witted.) Also, Barclay is super-hyper. Things continue to generate, climaxing when Worf, clearly in the grip of some kind of fever, attacks Troi and bites her. Then he spews disfiguring venom in Dr. Crusher's face. Clearly, something is amiss, but before we can find out what that something is, the story cuts to Picard and Data returning to the ship, the rogue torpedo successfully captured and deactivated. They find the *Enterprise* floating dead in space, the engines shut down, the computer deactivated. Riker is a caveman now, and Troi is some kind of weird frog monster; Barclay's a spider-thing (eek!), and Worf is, well, a psycho, horny rock monster. No, really. Data and Picard have to figure out what happened to the crew, and how to cure it, before Worf kills them, or Picard himself succumbs to the disease.

All right, do I have anything nice to say about this episode? It is, after all, directed by Gates McFadden, marking the first time a female cast member directed a *Trek* episode, and I like McFadden (as a fellow Brandeis alum, I think we'd get on quite well). Well, I was too busy snickering and/or cringing at the writing to notice the direction much, so I'll give it a pass in that respect. I did like the way the episode split in two, the first part showing the initial stages of the de-evolution process, the second part jumping forward in time to show us the end results through Picard and Data's perspective. It's a bit like ["Timescape"](#) in that respect, but just because the structure is familiar doesn't make it any less effective. And as goofy as all of this is, the monster make-up is impressively freaky.

But man oh man is this goofy. Data's explanation to Picard is that some kind of virus is causing inactive genetic codes called "introns" to reactivate in the crew, leading to the de-evolution. The virus is semi-random, so even people who share the same race won't necessarily fall back into the same earlier species, which is how the episode justifies both Spider-Barclay and Will "I like rocks" Riker. And that's it. There's no alien intelligence running this as a test on the *Enterprise* (which would be dumb, but still less dumb than the explanation we eventually get), and once we get the main idea of the episode, there's really nothing else we need to see. Data and Picard wander around for a while, Data figures out the problem, then he figures out how to solve it. There's some suspense, both in the early goings (when characters behave strangely for no apparent reason), and later on, when Picard has to distract a hormone-addled Worf, all while suffering from a sudden attack of the scaredy-cats. But while that final chase scene isn't awful, and gives Picard yet another opportunity to demonstrate his quick thinking in a crisis, the earlier tension isn't really an enjoyable kind of tension, because so much of it plays on Worf's ancestry as a dangerous, violent animal. While it's explained (to a point) by the narrative in a way that excuses him from his behavior, that doesn't make it less creepy to watch him leering at waitresses, snapping at Riker, or assaulting poor Troi and Beverly. Plus, there's every indication that he murdered the ensign Picard and Data find on the bridge, and the way this is casually tossed off is troubling to say the least.

The real kicker comes in the final scene, however, when we learn that the root cause of all this trouble was a dormant gene in Barclay that someone transformed into an airborne virus when Beverly tried to reactivate it. Seriously, that's the reason. The entire ship was thrown into chaos, people died, genetic structures were realigned, Troi turned into a freakin' frog thing, and it's just because oh hey, Barclay has weird genes. This is weak, weak sauce, a half-assed explanation that falls apart the moment you think about it, and makes an already dumb episode look even more foolish in retrospect. Even beyond the fact that "Oh, you just have weird genes" is a stupid reason

for anything, the cavalier way Beverly handles the situation—a situation that left her severely (if temporarily) disfigured, and, again, cost the life of at least one crewman. Bad enough that the show is resorting to corny, shallow storytelling as it winds down its final hours, but it's insult to viewers (and to the characters we've come to respect) to see the show implicitly acknowledge the shallowness of its writing without making any effort to correct it. Of this week's two episodes, I was more openly frustrated with "Journey's End," for reasons we'll get to shortly, but in retrospect, "Genesis" was the greater sin. At least "Journey's End" bothered to have ambition. "Genesis" just decided to take its de-evolutionary theme too much to heart.

Grade: C-

Stray observations:

- Riker rolled into a cactus while hooking up in the arboretum. Awww yeah.
- This was Barclay's last episode on the show. Which is odd, because even though he's technically responsible for what happens, it's not really a Barclay episode. (Although I did like the fact that Data asked him to take care of his cat, because Barclay is the only other person on the ship Spot will tolerate.)
- Data's cat Spot de-evolved into a lizard. No comment here, just putting that out there.
- Oh, and Data's solution to the problem was to use a pregnant woman to create a cure. SCIENCE.
- Random: Picard is supposedly spared the effects of the virus until he and Data return to the Enterprise, but he's on the ship earlier when Worf's new guidance system for the photon torpedoes fails. I'd assumed that this was due to Worf slowly losing his mind, but I'm not sure the timing works out: Either Picard just got lucky, or Worf is (sigh) incompetent.

"Journey's End" (season 7, episode 20; originally aired: 3/26/1994)

Or The One Where Wesley Turns Into Jonathan Livingston Seagull

There's an episode from the third series of the original *Star Trek* with Indians in it. It's called "[The Paradise Syndrome](#)," and judging by my review, it was rather absurd. It posits that a group of preservation-focused aliens (named, astonishingly, "the Preservers") grabbed a sampler of Native Americans off our Earth and transported them to a sort of a planetary national park, there to be free to be all Native American-y and in touch with nature and so forth. Kirk gets zapped and starts calling himself Kirok, and he marries a local princess, and there's an obelisk—anyway, like I said, absurd. (Man, there are only so many different words for "silly.") But then, while *TOS* certainly had far, far better episodes than "Paradise," it's not like the silliness was unprecedented. The original *Trek* was a broad-stroke show, more interested in big moments and bigger emotions than in anything so subtle as "basic plausibility." I cringed watching the horrifically stereotyped representations of Native Americans, but I wasn't exactly surprised by it.

On the other hand, I was surprised by "Journey's End," because this is *TNG*, and things are supposed to be, if not better, than at least better thought out here. I don't want to harp on the Indians (who are called "Indians," not Native Americans here—probably because that term hadn't been invented yet, but it still sounds weird) in "Journey's End" too much, because this is tricky ground. The episode does its best to be as respectful and open-minded as possible, and should be lauded for that. But I won't lie—something about watching men dressed in recognizable Native America-in-the-'90s garb talking about how they don't want to leave their home because the mountains speak to them rubs me the wrong way. I'm just not sure if my reaction is one that deserve legitimate critical analysis, or if it's just me knee-jerking at what, to my cynical eyes, looks like a lot mystical bullcrap. I've always appreciated how hard *TNG* has worked over the years to treat all cultures (except Ferengi, because ew) with respect, and it's not like the Indians we see here act that much differently than, say, the Klingons Worf visited when he went on a spiritual retreat. But it still feels like pandering.

Worse, it feels like treating an issue that's relevant in modern times—guilt over the way white settlers and the American government murdered and stole land from an indigenous people—as though it will still have the same level of relevancy 300 years into the future. On the major dramatic cruxes of the episode is Picard's guilt over having to moving a group of Indians. These Indians having been living on the same planet for 20 years, but now, due to a new treaty signed by the Federation and the Cardassian empire, that planet no longer belongs to them. The Cardassians are coming, and before they arrive, Admiral Necheyev tasks Picard and the *Enterprise* with making sure the planet's current inhabitants have been moved to a less diplomatically desirable location. Unfortunately, the Indians don't want to move, because the place has a special meaning for them, so now Picard has a big case of the ol' White Guilt blues. It certainly doesn't improve his frame of mind when the tribal leader tells the captain he's convinced this is all happening because one of Picard's ancestors was involved in a massacre of Native Americans centuries before.

Actually, I don't really see how that should affect Picard's frame of mind in the slightest, because it is ridiculous. The idea that he would feel some kind of racial culpability for a crime someone hundreds and hundreds of years dead committed is absurd, especially seeing as how he didn't even know of the event until this episode. I realize that people are often motivated in strange ways by their family history, but this seems like an arbitrary attempt to drum up drama at best. The episode tries to frame the re-location of the Indians as a great tragedy, and it doesn't play. This isn't the Trail of Tears. There's some irony in the fact that a culture that spent a long time being jerked around and betrayed is once again being asked to leave what it thought was home, but it's not enough irony to build an episode on. The funny thing is, the basic premise is not actually terrible. "Journey's End" does do a decent job of trying to make sure we understand the perspectives of every side involved in the situation, and the Indians' refusal to leave should lead to some great drama, as Picard is forced to choose between obeying his orders, or following his conscience—if he even knows which direction his conscience is tending. But it just comes off as insufferable.

Still, if that was all this episode was about, I'd probably view it more favorably than I did. Get past the irritating trappings, and the conflict is decent. Even the ending isn't terrible, as the Indians make a deal with the Cardassians to keep living on the planet. (Although I'm not sure this is a "happy" ending, mind you. Picard unequivocally states that once the Indians agree to this deal, they will no longer be under Federation protection. Gul Evек seems like a nice enough guy for a Cardassian, but it's hard not to wonder what will happen the first time the Indians and their neighbors come into conflict.) What makes this truly laughable is a roped-in attempt to resolve the Wesley Crusher story arc.

I'm not sure if you remember this; I sure as hell didn't. But way back in the first season episode, ["Where No One Has Gone Before,"](#) we learned that Wesley is a Chosen One. Not *the* Chosen One, because that would've required a lot more time and attention and possibly a wand of some sort, but he is a very special boy, so special that an alien being has to make a trip to the *Enterprise* just to tell him how cool he is. That alien, called simply The Traveler, left at the end of the episode, before making another cameo appearance in ["Remember Me,"](#) never clarifying exactly who he was or where he was from, but just giving a lot of vague hints about destiny and possibility and other planes of existence. This couldn't have been easy on Wesley, who's spent his whole life having people tell him he was remarkable, without ever knowing exactly what that meant. When he returns to the *Enterprise* at the start of "Journey's End," he's in a lousy mood, and nothing his mother or his friends say will cheer him up. It isn't until one of the Indians finds him and tells him he was destined to appear that Wesley—

Eh? Yes, I just wrote "destined to appear." And yes, that is what Lakana, the Indian mystic, tells Wesley. Which sounds like someone got a little too much fantasy in my sci-fi (and it tastes improbable), but on the plus side, it turns out that Lakana isn't actually an Indian. He's The Traveler in disguise, because I guess it was easier for him to test Wesley by pretending to be someone else. Also, Wesley can stop time now, or move to those other fabled planes of existence in such a way as to create the illusion that he's stopping time, and really, this isn't any less improbable

than it was before The Traveler showed up, it's just that now we can pretend continuity lends credibility. Wesley, realizing that the reason he's been so angry and depressed is that he's trying to fill his father's shoes, and that he was meant for something else entirely, gives up his cadet's uniform, drops out of Starfleet Academy, and leaves the ship, and *TNG*, for good.

I appreciate the writers' desire to wrap up loose ends, I really do. But some loose ends are best left forgotten, especially when they were initially introduced on a very different show. *TNG*'s first season was a mess, and while "Where No One Has Gone Before" was one of the first episodes that didn't entirely suck, it wasn't a classic by any stretch of the imagination, and the "Wesley Is A Very Special Boy" storyline was never a good fit for this show. It's puts too much emphasis on the wish-fulfillment aspects of the character, and it relies too much on what is basically magic to work with the series *TNG* finally (thankfully) became. If the seventh season had ended without ever referencing Wesley's destiny or The Traveler, I'm sure some detail freaks would've complained, but I'd prefer to believe they'd be a minority. Building a story through television is (if you're very lucky) a long and complicated process, and the writers are not omniscient gods. They don't always know what plots will work down the line, and which ones will be the narrative equivalent of that week you wanted to be a ballerina. (Don't lie.) I'm willing to cut slack.

But as much as I'm impressed with the obsessive-compulsive attention to detail this episode represents, no amount of slack in the world will make it worthwhile. Wesley was often a difficult character, smarmy, irritatingly over-smart, creepily dependent on Picard (remember when he built that robot that talked in Picard's voice? <shudder>), but in the last few seasons, he'd come into his own. He made mistakes, some of them quite serious, but he learned from them, and I was ready to assume he would do great things, and that those great things would be almost entirely off camera. And then "Journey's End" comes along, and it's all "You're ready to move beyond these puny mortals," and putting on hippy clothes, and hanging out with a paternal—if somewhat unsettling—and mysterious bald dude. (Oh my God, that's why he trusts The Traveler—the alien looks a little like Picard!) *TNG* has referenced episodes from the first season before, and used that reference as a chance to make up for past mistakes. It looks like that era of smart writing is gone, sadly, and now all that's left is to wait for the end.

Grade: C

Stray observations:

- One unequivocal good in all this is the attempted reconciliation with Admiral Necheyev. For once, she's presented in a sympathetic light, and it's a nice change of pace from the constant influx of jerky superior officers.

Next next week (December 1): We spend some time with Worf's "Firstborn" (sigh), and watch as Picard tracks down his "Bloodlines."

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Firstborn”/“Bloodlines”](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[12/01/11 10:00AM](#)

“Firstborn” (season 7, episode 21; originally aired 4/23/1994)

Or The One Where It's Your Kid, Worf, Something Has To Be Done About Your Kid

I'm not sure why it is that saddling characters with children is so often a bad idea. I have my suspicions, though. Part of it is being forced to see a formerly beloved hero assume a different, less overtly heroic role—as the next generation (hey!) steps in, the previous generation recedes in importance, and nobody wants to be reminded that they, too, will someday be a footnote in someone else's journey. More than that, though, a child means a restriction of movement, and I watched a show about people on a spaceship because I want, basically, the opposite of that. Admittedly, it's not as though the arrival of Alexander back in season four handcuffed Worf to a crib or anything, but we have had a number of episodes focusing on Worf's struggles with being a single parent, and his difficulties in trying to bond with his son. While the story arc of Worf's attempts to understand his place in the Klingon Empire have deepened our understanding and appreciation of the character, while also expanding the universe of the show, the Alexander Chronicles found one note and hit that note with varying degrees of intensity: Worf wants Alexander to embrace his warrior heritage, Alexander is more interested in being a regular Federation-raised kid, Worf is emotionally reserved, Alexander is whiny, rinse, repeat.

That covers a good chunk of “Firstborn,” the last *TNG* episode to focus on Worf's child-rearing catastrophes, and the first ever to present time travel as the easiest way for father and son to communicate. If that description makes “Firstborn” sound interesting, well, it's not. Not really, and certainly not for the first two-thirds of its running time, which, for novelty's sake, combines Alexander issues with intrigue from the Klingon homeworld involving Worf's brother, certain questions of inheritance, and the villainous Duras sisters. It's competently done, but there's not much

in the way of spark, because so much of this a retread of old routines. Worf wants Alexander to participate in a ritual that indicates the official beginning of his path towards becoming a warrior, and Alexander isn't sure he wants to participate. So Worf, at Picard's urging, takes Alexander to watch a Klingon ritual, and after the ritual, just as Alexander seems to finally be getting excited about pointy things and shouting, a group of assassins attacks, and Worf has to defend himself. He gets some help from a stranger whose been watching him all day, a Klingon named K'mtar who claims to be an important adviser in Worf's brother's household. After the attack is defeated, K'mtar sticks around to help Worf discover who tried to kill him, and also to work on convincing Alexander the importance of physical combat in a world of easy phaser access.

Let's cut to the chase, shall we? K'mtar is not who he claims to be. He is, in fact, Alexander From The Future. Yeah, not kidding at all here, and it's not a long con, or a dream, or some sort of paradox. I'm not even sure how this works. Old Alexander first proves he is who he says he is by describing what happened the day his mother died (apparently, even though this is the future and science is practically everywhere, which means it'd be the easiest thing in the world to run a DNA test—see next episode—Worf accepts this as sufficient explanation), then tells his sad tale. See, in the future, Alexander refused the warrior's training Worf wanted for him, and took on the life of an ambassador instead, working to bring peace to the Klingon Empire. He succeeded, for the most part, but when it finally came time to sign the treaty, assassins killed Worf in front of Alexander's eyes, and because he didn't know how to fight, he couldn't defend his father. So now he's come back in time to convince his younger self to learn how to fight, to save his father's life a few decades down the line.

This doesn't really make a lot of sense. Structurally, we don't get this information till the last 10 minutes of the episode, which means there's not a lot of time to process its implications; up until that point, there are certain hints that K'mtar might not be who he said he was, but nothing substantial, beyond the curious design of one of the assassin's daggers. (A symbol on the dagger hilt references the fact that one of the Duras sisters had a child, but when the *Enterprise* finally tracks down the sisters, they find out the pregnant one just realized she was pregnant a few days ago. Which is an odd coincidence, actually; the reason that the symbol is there is because the knife comes from the future—I guess it probably was the weapon used to kill future Worf—but there's no reason why Old Alexander would just happen to jump back in time to right at the same moment the sister realizes she's with child. It would've been more plausible for neither sister to be pregnant, and use that to deny their involvement.) I've heard accusations that TNG used time travel too casually, but this is the first episode where that accusation really seemed like truth. Even [“Time's Arrow”](#) at least attempted to treat the violation of the laws of causality with some modicum of respect. In “Firstborn,” jumping back 40 years and directly interfering with your past self is presented as a perfectly rational approach to grief, like sleeping too much or crying at Hallmark commercials. We don't even see K'mtar leave. After he tells Worf his story, and Worf gives him a hug and says everything's gonna be okay, K'mtar vanishes off screen, leaving room for one last scene in which Worf can tell his present day son that he can be whatever kind of Klingon he wants to be.

That's a not a bad way to end this, and to its credit, “Firstborn” does do a decent job of playing fair to the values of both the father and the son. While Worf's Klingon heritage will always look a bit silly to my eyes—here it's basically a scene of two grown men singing at each other and pretending to fight—it's not considered ridiculous or pointless within the context of the show; and as shrill as Alexander gets, it's hard not to understand where he's coming from when he says he doesn't particularly want to spent the next 10 years or so of his life getting over his reluctance to murder fallen enemies. When Old Alexander describes the future to Worf, his accomplishments are actually quite impressive, which is one of the reasons why Worf ultimately decides to let his son find his own path. If you squint a little, there's something rather beautiful in this, and in a real distant way, it marks a kind of conclusion to the arc Worf's been riding since the first season. He still values the old ways, but he recognizes that the Klingon Empire needs to change if it's to survive, and he's proud to learn that his son could be a part of that

change. By the end, Worf is optimistic about the future, convinced that his knowledge of what happens next will save him, but you get the impression as well that he doesn't mind dying if it means Alexander can live the life he chooses. That's a great message, no question.

Shame, then, that's in such a goofy, plausibility-straining hour of television. There's a lot of useless wandering around as the *Enterprise* tries to track down whoever tried to kill Worf; since K'mtar was the one to stage the assassination attempt, they obviously aren't going to find anything, although we do get a brief cameo from *Deep Space Nine*'s Quark. (Actually, there's a whole string of wheedling, kind of scummy aliens that pops up throughout the episode, as though the show was trying to hit a quota before the end of the run.) Too much time is spent on a distraction when it could've been spent dealing with the ramifications of "K'mtar's" trip. But then, I'm not sure more attention would've made his decision to risk the fabric of space time to save his father's life (who died, let's not forget, when Alexander was already an adult; a tragedy, sure, but not something so awful that it would merit potentially erasing one's existence. I get that Old Alexander is driven as much by guilt as by grief, but it's still a little ridiculous.). Because that would've given us time to wonder why Worf never got in touch with his brother directly to see what was going on; doing so would've exposed Old Alexander as a liar far too soon. The real problem here is that this is an idea that just doesn't work. Time travel shouldn't be a casual plot fixative. There should be a cost involved, and there's no real cost here. Any time I try and take any part of "Firstborn" seriously, I go back to Old Alexander's tortured I "AM YOUR SON," and I roll my eyes. I can't help it. This is an episode that needed something extra to make it worth watching, but they overshot the mark, and turned a dull-but-credible hour into a dull-but-absurd one.

Grade: C+

Stray observations:

- How thrilling was Riker and Quark's discussing about pressed latinum vouchers? Very! (Although I did love the extra standing at attention in the back of Quark's set, in case we thought it was just an actor in a room.)
- Credit where it's due: The scene where Alexander bugs his dad for money so he can hang out with his friends is kind of sweet.
- How Klingons Are Different From Most Of Us: When a child participates in a ceremonial battle and decides to take things very seriously, no one calls the cops.

"Bloodlines" (season 7, episode 22; originally aired 4/30/1994)

Or The One Where Picard Realizes His Whole Life Has Been A Cover Of "Cat's In The Cradle," Only Not Really

Did everybody get enough Daddy issues in "Firstborn"? No? Well have I got an episode for you!

I'm not really a television historian. Yes, yes, I realize this may come as a shock, but I've never had a good head for dates or trends or important names. In some ways, this limits my usefulness as a critic of classic TV; if I had any real regret over my work on the various *Trek* series so far, it's that I've never put much effort into trying to contextualize the shows, beyond stating some common knowledge. (I don't really regret this, honestly, because I think we all have fun anyway, and I do good work in other areas. In fact, the only time this has really bothered me is back when I was doing my write-ups of [The Prisoner](#), which I can't help feeling was something of a missed opportunity. But I digress.) So when I say that it's a sign of desperation when a show starts throwing long-lost relatives at its main characters to try and generate new drama, I can't provide you with a catalog of examples to back up the assertion. But it makes a certain amount of sense. This late in a run, you've probably worked through all the major conflicts between the ensemble, and given that *TNG* generally avoiding the usual bed-hopping that comes from workplace

dramas, there's only so much mileage you can get out of Beverly and Picard occasionally glancing at each other. So its time to start pulling every trick in the book: [buried secrets](#), [inter-dimensional prophets](#), and [orgasm-inducing aliens](#).

And now we can add "long lost son" to the list. (Actually, have we been down this road before? I suppose Alexander sort of counts, and maybe there was something with Riker at some point... nah, I'd remember that.) Picard is having his usual stellar day when he gets a visit from Bok, a Ferengi who blames Picard for the death of his son. This brings us to another classic late-season ploy—the "Hey, let's bring back stuff from the first season, because we definitely want to remind people how long we've been on the air!" game. We went through this with "Journey's End," and now we're getting a call-back to the first season episode "[The Battle](#)," in which then DaiMon Bok attempted to get his revenge on Picard via a mind-control device. At the end of "Battle," Bok was stripped of his rank for engaging in an unprofitable mission (sigh), but he's back now, and apparently up to no good, using a variety of probes and transporter techniques to send Picard a simple message: Bok is going to murder the captain's son.

Only, so far as Picard knew, he doesn't have a son. So now it's a race to find this mysterious progeny before Bok does, and prevent the unthinkable. (Er, actually, it's been thought of, so I guess the unacceptable? Which makes murder sound like a poor test result, but whatever.) If everyone wasn't so hell-bent on saving the day, they might stop to wonder just why Bok would be so keen on warning Picard of his intentions in advance. We learn later on that it sort of makes sense; Picard doesn't actually have a son, but he was in a relationship with a woman named Miranda who had a kid named Jason who doesn't know who his father is, so Bok manipulates Jason's DNA to match Picard's, and none of this wouldn't have been worth it if Picard hadn't had some time to bond with his fake offspring. Although that still requires a ridiculous amount of planning and good luck, and it's bizarre that Bok would be so invested in all this. When Bok was originally introduced, Picard's involvement in his son's death (which happened while Picard was captain of the *Stargazer*) made for a decent dynamic; even if Picard didn't have any reason to be guilty, he could at least feel responsible enough for there to be some tension between wanting to protect himself, and dealing with the past. Plus, this is season one we're talking about. A lot of crazy shit went down back then, and it was easy to accept anything that even hinted at competence. Now, though, Bok's two-dimensional obsession makes him look like a sub-par Batman villain.

That means that our only real hope for any depth here is the connection Picard tried to build between himself and Jason Vigo, the 20something scoundrel who he believes is his son. The Bok problem doesn't have a lot of surprises, apart from the twist that Jason is a con (who doesn't realize he's a con), so a good chunk of the episode is taken up with Picard and Vigo's tentative attempts at rapprochement. None of it's revolutionary, but as usual, Patrick Stewart does his best with what he's given, and there's a certain dignity in his careful, measured sincerity, unsure of his next step but determined to do the right thing. As Jason, Ken Olandt is fine, in a generically charming-and-good-looking kind of way. (To put it in different terms, the actor wouldn't look out of place doing a guest spot on a CW show.) The two have one genuinely good scene together on the holodeck, as Picard carefully attempts to explain his reasons behind wanting to establish a relationship. They talk about Jason's mother, who died years ago, about his troubled past, and various other things, and Picard gets the best line of the episode: "You'll never look at your hairline in the same way again."

And yet, too much of this relationship is built on the premise that its a parent's responsibility to force his way into their child's life, even if that child is an adult and doesn't seem to particularly want to meet his dad. (Even if his dad is the freakin' captain of a starship, I mean come on.) The downside to *TNG*'s utopian vision is its assumption that meddling in other's lives is an automatic good if one's intentions are in the right place. The Prime Directive stops them from doing this with outsiders, but there seems to be no limit to the amount of poking, prodding, and unasked for interrogations you'd be forced to endure if you happened to wander around the *Enterprise* having a bad day. Compassion is a wonderful thing, but so are boundaries, and time and again, our heroes have shown an inability to

grasp this. Beverly tells Picard he should push to get closer to his son, and while Picard initially resists this, he ultimately decides his resistance is based on selfishness; he has responsibilities, and given Jason's criminal record (mostly just petty theft and an occasional bar fight), it's his duty to get involved. Commendable motives, and it works out in the end—Because really, who wouldn't want Captain Picard as a dad?—but I'm not sure I buy the message. Jason isn't a teenager. He's an adult, and if he doesn't want a stranger butting into his life and telling him where he went wrong, that's his right.

Not that any of this matters, because of course Jason isn't really Picard's son. It's hard to get too worked up over any of this, really. There's a brief tension when Bok manages to beam Jason off the *Enterprise* even after Geordi and Data have done all they can to stop the Ferengi's plans, but being the cartoon villain he is, Bok decides to gloat over Jason for a while before actually stabbing him, giving Picard enough time to bravely beam aboard the Ferengi ship and explain to Bok's crew just how crazy their new "DaiMon" really is. This is largely one-note material, and since Bok's issues with Picard aren't really delved into, there's no weight to anything that happens. It's not horrible, but beyond the above mentioned scene, and a few eerie moments when Bok suddenly appears in Picard's quarters, it's not really necessary, either. If the grade seems harsh, well, it's not that I mind episodes like this; it's just, there's something sad about coming to the end of a show I love, and realizing I'm more and more eager to be finished with it.

Grade: C+

Stray observations:

- Jason gets to participate in the Ritual of Hitting On Deanna when the counselor stops by his rooms to say "Hi." Not sure why this scene exists, but hey, gotta fill the running time somehow.

Next week... and beyond! All right, we're getting down to the wire here, so let's start locking in the schedule. Next Thursday, 12/8, we'll be doing "Emergence" and "Preemptive Strike," the final two episodes before the finale. On 12/15, we'll be taking look at *Star Trek: Insurrection*, the second to last big screen outing for the *TNG* crew, and on the following Saturday, (12/17), *The AV Club* will host a live chat-through of *Star Trek: Nemesis*, the final *TNG* film. (This will work like the live chat Todd VanDerWerff and I did for *X-Files: Fight The Future*, although I'm not sure who my co-host will be.) And finally, on 12/22, just in time for Christmas, we'll close out the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* reviews with a look at the two part series finale, "All Good Things..."

So, to sum up:

12/8: "Emergence/Preemptive Strike"

12/15: *Star Trek: Insurrection*

12/17: *Star Trek: Nemesis* live chat

12/22: "All Good Things..."

And then Christmas and New Years and so forth, which should be a nice change of pace for everyone.

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: “Emergence”/“Preemptive Strike”](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[12/08/11 10:00AM](#)

“Emergence” (season 7, episode 23; originally aired 5/7/1994)

Or *The One Where The Enterprise Gets A Heart, Brain, and Courage*

After what seems like months of slogging through sub-par to awful *TNG* episodes, I finally catch a break just before the end, with a pair of decent to great episodes to ease me into the forthcoming Movie Extravaganza, and, ultimately, the series finale. Out of this week’s pairing, “Emergence” is easily the weakest; it feels more like an episode from the second season, an interesting idea that’s more than a little undercooked, with an ending that’s less a conclusion and more a shrug. But it’s consistent in its aims, which means there’s no sudden, poorly justified twist at the end, and it’s weird enough that it’s never incredibly boring. The cast isn’t forced to betray their characters for narrative purposes. Beverly isn’t [sexually assaulted by an alien](#). It’s the little things that make me happy these days.

Speaking of little things, “Emergence” opens with what I’m assuming is a reference to the show approaching its conclusion, as Data plays Prospero from *The Tempest* for the benefit of a somewhat distracted Picard. The monologue Data recites comes from near the end of the play, as Prospero states his intentions to break his staff and burn his books and basically get on with his life, which isn’t a terrible sentiment to express when you’re getting ready to shut down a seven-year-old production. The scene is a nice callback to Data’s various efforts over the course of the show to develop his humanity, an arc that never really got the finale it deserved, but managed to generate many of the series’ most powerful, original moments. And maybe it’s appropriate that we never got a definitive version of Data-as-real-boy. Unless you’ve got a fairy godmother following you around, the journey to humanity isn’t one with a set or foreseeable conclusion. It would’ve been nice to spend more time with Data before the end, but given the general tenor of the seventh season (and the way that last [Data-centric episode played out](#), with Lore and the Borg and, well, ugh, basically), maybe we’re better off this way. None of *TNG*’s cast would be

well-served by the film franchise, but poor Data got the brunt of the damage, so it's a relief to see him here, much the same as he always was, without any unfortunate emotional ties or painfully forced attempts at comic relief.

Picard and Data have their little talk about the context of Prospero's speech, but before Data can give it another go, the two are interrupted by a passing train. Which is, to the say the least, a little odd, and it marks the return of one of *TNG*'s most reliably goofy plot generators: the malfunctioning holodeck. See, something happened to the ship when the *Enterprise* passed through a magnetic storm ("magnetic storm" is basically just "a wizard did it," isn't it?), and now various systems are acting up. Specifically, the engine takes control of itself and hits warp drive without Picard's express command; but what's really startling is when Geordi discovers the *Enterprise*'s quick jump actually saved the ship from being destroyed by a build up of theta flux distortion, a kind of disturbance the ship's computers weren't actually designed to detect. This has all sorts of implications as to what's really happening—it's not just a series of malfunctions, it's actually a behavior pattern. But what really struck me is how weird it is that there's a kind of distortion which can build up naturally in space, which the *Enterprise* isn't normally able to detect, and which, if left unchecked, can destroy the ship. Awfully convenient the computer developed sentience at exactly the right moment to save the day.

All of this is silly stuff, played as straight-forwardly as possible, and it gets sillier when Data and Geordi start finding curious nodes distributed through out the *Enterprise*'s internal wiring, nodes that they've never seen before. Data theorizes that the ship's computer has somehow developed an independent consciousness, demonstrating a survival instinct (i.e., that sudden burst of warp speed) and sort of random whimsy you could label as the efforts of a growing mind. There is something almost unbearably cute in having the *Enterprise* go all sentient, as though after seven years of being forced to carry around a gaggle of well-intentioned doofuses (and Picard), the ship suddenly decided it needed to have its own adventures. I've never been exactly sure what people mean when they say a location is a "character" in a movie or TV show—it always seems like one of those vague phrases critics use when they're trying to indicate a concept that can't be adequately pinned down in words—but if you can say it about anything, you can say that the *Enterprise* is a character on *TNG*. At the very least, we've spent a large chunk of the series worried about her well-being, and looking for cures to her various ailments, so it's kind of adorable that here, right before the end, she gets to drive the action rather be a victim of it.

Also cute? The way the holodeck, as it has so many times before, becomes the capital of Crazyland. That train Picard and Data saw earlier wasn't a singular phenomenon. Ripped off from Beverly's Oriental Express program (sidebar: it irritates me that we learn this via a conversation between Picard and Beverly, in which he recites some facts about the Express, and she tells him he should just relax and embrace the romance of it. One of the more unfortunate assumptions of so much popular culture is that knowledge is somehow unromantic, and that true appreciation stems more from an emotional understanding than an intellectual one. Really, it's been my experience that the latter generally leads to the former more often than not. To sum up: Beverly should have said, "Of course I know that, I designed the program, isn't it fascinating?" and then we could've spent twenty minutes on train facts), the train now serves as a home to cast-offs from various other programs, each of which represents a different aspect of the ship's burgeoning personality. When Riker, Worf, and Data enter the holodeck, they find a car full of disparate characters, from a knight in full armor, to a gunslinger villain, to an engineer, to a debutante, and so on. It's weird and cheesy and not quite as creepy as it might have been, but close enough to be interesting.

Once the *Enterprise* starts flying itself again, and siphoning particles from a dwarf star in order to construct some sort of device or object in one of the cargo bays, Troi decides to communicate with the ship's consciousness. So we get some more silly stuff with a gangster and a city set, and Data stops a 1930s era taxi-cab with one hand. This is the kind of episode I always have a hard time reviewing, because while I'm watching it, I'm fine with it; but when it comes time to write anything down, I can never think of what to say. "Emergence" isn't terrible; I wasn't cringing or actively embarrassed at any point, but I wasn't engaged either, because apart from the goofy costumes and weird,

quasi-eerie symbolism, there's really nothing here to get that invested in. Troi gets hit in the head by some falling bricks, but apart from that, no one's in any real danger; obviously it's a problem that the *Enterprise* is controlling itself, but it's not an immediate problem, because the ship isn't screwing around with life support or playfully beaming various crew-members into open space. Apart from a general sense of strangeness, the only real tension in the episode doesn't come up until the final 10 minutes or so, when the life form the ship is trying to create is in jeopardy. Even then, there's no real sense that the thing might die.

And who cares if it does? "Emergence" spends so much time working on the symbolism on the holodeck that it never really does much with the various implications of its storyline, and that's arguably the least interesting way to handle the central idea here. Picard pays lip service to the importance of treating any emergent life with respect and compassion, and that's a fine idea, but there's never any sacrifice necessary on the part of the crew to maintain these ideals. We've had episodes where our heroes have struggled with the difficulties raised by the Prime Directive, and the drama there emerged out of localized compassion conflicting against long-term philosophical necessity. Here, though, it's simply, "We should get control back. Hm, I guess it may prove to be tricky. Oh look, we can actually get control and give the ship what it needs. We should probably do that!" And once this is accomplished, everything reverts back exactly to the way it was. The ship's emerging intelligence vanishes, and the life form it put so much effort into generating (which looks like something that should be churning out sheets of candy dots in Willy Wonka's factory) just flies out of the *Enterprise*, never to be heard from again. Data and Picard have a nice closing scene together, but it's hard to shake the nagging sensation that nothing really happened here. Which is fine, not every episode needs to feature some titanic struggle and the collapse of the status quo, but it would've been nice if there'd been something approaching stakes in a storyline which ostensibly had thousands of people wake up one morning inside the belly of an unknown beast. Still, it was generally okay, and could've been considerably worse.

Grade: B-

Stray observations:

- Most adorable moment in the episode? Probably when everyone on the train started drinking champagne after the ship completed its mission.

"Preemptive Strike" (season 7, episode 24; originally aired 5/14/1994)

Or The One Where Picard Puts His Complete Trust In Someone, But Shouldn't Have

Politically, *TNG* has never been a daring show. Sure, we've touched on hot-buttons issues dressed up in science-fiction tropes from time to time, and we've seen our fair share of hateful bureaucrats getting in the way of letting our heroes do their job, but if you were to leave the series with an almost uniformly positive impression of the Federation as "good guys," I'd be hard pressed to argue. That's one of the main reasons why *Firefly* is structured the way it is; having the Federation-like Alliance serve as a force of control and a source of potential danger for the heroes was Joss Whedon's way of undercutting the rah-rah-hegemony vibe of the *Trek* franchise. (It was also a way to mimic the classic Westerns trope of a former Southern soldier trying to survive a post-Civil War world, without calling up any of Johnny Reb's unpleasant connotations.) From what I've heard, *Deep Space Nine* does some undercutting of its own, and I look forward to seeing how that plays out, but for right now, everything I've seen has led me to believe that Starfleet is just peachy. I may have my suspicions (mostly due to the show's tendency to portray any culture that outright opposes the Federation as villainous), but that's all they are.

It's odd, then, that the series' penultimate episode goes to such lengths to inspire sympathy for those outside of Starfleet, to the point where the episode's climax features a major recurring character betraying Picard's trust. Odder still, it's pretty clear that the episode wants us to believe she made the right choice. "Preemptive Strike" is a

challenging piece of work, and often an unsettling one, forcing us to look at Captain Jean-Luc Picard—ostensibly the most trustworthy character on the entire ship (I think I’ve used this phrase before, possibly in reference to Data, so let’s just call it a tie)—as well-intentioned but misguided obstacle in the path of Ensign Ro becoming who she really wishes to be. The episode doesn’t insist we take this view, and Picard never becomes outright villainous or cruel, but we spend considerably more time with Ro, watching as she comes to realize she’s finally found the place where she belongs. In a way, “Preemptive Strike” plays like a much smarter, much more effective version of [“Journey’s End,”](#) where Wesley realized his true destiny was to hook up with Lurch and go planet-hopping. Like Wesley, Ro meets a wise old man who helps her feel like her life has meaning again, and like Wesley, Ro is forced into a position where in order to follow her beliefs, she needs to disobey orders from her superior officers. But where “Journey’s End” concluded with a lot of hugging and smiling, the last shot of “Strike” is Picard, stone-faced, staring off screen. It’s one of a handful of *TNG* final scenes which isn’t inherently optimistic or accepting, and there’s something shocking about that. “Preemptive Strike” isn’t just a better episode than “Journey’s End” because it’s not inherently ridiculous; it’s also honest enough to admit that sometimes, you have to go against the people you care about. And when you do, there’s no guarantee your relationship will ever be the same again.

How did we get to this point? Why, trouble with the Cardassians, of course. It’s all political and complicated and whatnot, but basically, everyone’s supposed to be at peace, but the Cardassians keeps pulling nasty tricks on Bajoran settlers to drive them out of disputed territory, and in response, a group of Bajoran fighters calling themselves the Maquis have banded together to defend their people. Lately, the Maquis have decided to switch from defense to offense, and have started attacking Cardassian freighters. This doesn’t sit well with the Federation, because however sympathetic they might be to the Bajorans, they’ve got a treaty with the Cardassians to protect, and the Maquis’ actions could upset that treat. (I suddenly realized, if I’m going to cover *DS9*, I’m going to have to get a lot more comfortable summarizing complicated, somewhat metaphorical political issues.) So Starfleet decides they need to take action to shut down the Maquis, and they want Picard’s help to do it. Of course, they’ll also need someone on the inside, and for that, they’ll need Ro Laren.

Another curious element of this episode, when considered in terms of its placement next to the series finale, is the way the hour is largely devoted to Ro, first re-introducing her to the *Enterprise*, then watching her as she integrates herself into the Maquis and is slowly won over by their cause. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this, and it’s a key part of the episode; if we’d spent our time with Picard and Riker as they fretted over their lack of regular reports, and the growing doubts about Ro’s reliability, this would’ve been a decent but probably less complicated and interesting story. And yet, as a fan of *TNG* who has come to have a lot of fondness for the entire ensemble, I can’t help feeling cheated at seeing the show’s next-to-last episode focus so little on the main characters. Equally as curious is how the shift in focus serves to make the series’ regular leads come off as a little less heroic than they normally do. There’s Picard’s obstinacy, for one, but the few moments we get with Beverly and Troi make both women seem somewhat foolish, pampered and naive women who don’t understand the challenges of the real universe. Even Riker, for the five minutes we see him, comes off as something of... well, not a buffoon, not exactly. (I appreciate the episode’s subtle indication that Riker respects what Ro does, even if Picard doesn’t.) But his “loyal soldier” behavior makes him look a little naive. It’s not that I mind being made aware that these characters are more complex than we normally realize, but to get that knowledge so close to the end, without any chance for it to expand or affect other episodes, is a little disappointing.

That doesn’t take away from what this episode achieves, however, and while it doesn’t always feel like a *TNG* ep, it still holds up quite nicely, tricky morality and all. I especially appreciated the careful way “Preemptive Strike” re-establishes the relationship between Ro and Picard, her clear gratitude to him for all he’s done for her career, and his trust in her abilities and her loyalty. There’s nothing exactly romantic going on between them, and that’s for the best, but the chemistry between Patrick Stewart and Michelle Forbes is phenomenal. Late in the episode, Ro and Picard

meet in a bar to exchange information. It's a conversation that starts pleasantly enough; to hide what they're talking about from prying ears, the two pretend to be a prostitute and prospective client, which means a lot of touching and lot of whispering in each other's ears. Picard doesn't realize it at first, but Ro's doubts about her mission, after meeting all the kind, noble folks in the Maquis and watching a Cardassian shoot one of them down, have solidified, and she wants to call off a planned trap. The scene plays almost like a break-up, or a lover realizing his partner has had an affair. It's not perfect; Picard's refusal to listen to Ro's doubts and his determination to have the mission go through as planned (even to the point of insisting on Riker being present to make sure she doesn't try and back out) seems out of character for someone as resolutely humanist as Jean-Luc tends to be. But while it may not sit entirely comfortably within the context of the entire series, as a scene on its own, and working within this episode, it's terrific.

Really, this whole episode is great, and if this is the sort of complexity I can look forward to in *DS9*, I'll have my work cut out for me. There are quibbles, because hey, I wouldn't feel comfortable if I wasn't able to poke a few holes here and there. Macias, the older Bajoran who helps convert Ro over to the side of the Maquis isn't the subtlest of archetypes, and we're never given much sign that his Andy Griffith routine is a ruse designed to earn people's trust (I don't mean it has to be a ruse, but he lays it on a bit thick either way). The fact that Macias dies is an overly convenient way to remind Ro that the Cardassians are evil, and I'm not sure how smoothly her plan to defect will work out in the long run. If the Federation wanted to be pissy about it, they could spread the word that she was a double agent, and given her record in Starfleet, some of the rumors would stick. But hey, that's her worry, not mine.

Again, though, quibbles, as are my comments on the placement of the episode in the season's overall order. It's heartening to see *TNG* manage such an accomplished hour right before the end, one that builds on established relationships and moves in ways we don't expect. That may be the biggest shock of all, really. *Trek* has trained us over the years to have faith in the system, to believe that every wayward soul can find his or her way back to society if they choose to—and, unless they're actively evil, they always choose to. Only here, we have someone we have every reason to trust, someone who's proven her basic decency and strength in every episode she's been in, and she turns her back on what we thought were the good guys. Not because she's evil or misled—at worse, you could say she's misguided, but I have a hard time believing that. "Preemptive Strike" leads us to the inexorable conclusion that sometimes, there is no easy answer; sometimes, whichever way you chose means hurting someone you trust. It's a difficult lesson to learn, but an important one, and it makes for a moving, uncompromising hour.

Grade: A

Stray observations:

- Well, this is the last appearance Ensign Ro Laren makes in the *Trek* universe. Too bad, really; the character would've been fun to revisit a few years down the line.
- I have to tell you, the fact that this feature is ending keeps hitting me at odd moments. I've been writing these reviews for nearly two years now, and it's hard to remember what my work schedule was like before I had to remember to make room for a double dose of Picard and his merry band each Thursday. I'm not sure how to feel about this. On the one hand, it's not a huge deal. On the other hand, it sort of is. Ah well, maybe I should just stop thinking about it so much.

Next week: I suffer through *Star Trek: Insurrection* for your pleasure.

[Star Trek: Insurrection](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[12/15/11 10:00AM](#)

I'm going to come right out and say it: *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is a better show than [the original series](#). This isn't to say *TOS* is without its charms, or that it isn't hugely important to the franchise, but judged as a whole, it's tough to argue that *TNG* isn't superior; it's more emotionally complex, more fully realized, and the caliber of acting (if only from the captain's chair) is stronger. And yet Kirk's *Trek* gave us [Star Trek II: The Wrath Of Khan](#), one of the best science fiction adventure movies ever made, along with the very credible [Star Treks IV](#) and [VI](#), and even the worst entries in the *TOS* movie franchise have a certain crazed ambition to them, whether its meeting god, resurrecting a fallen friend, or copying *2001*. When it came time for the original *Trek* to make the jump to the big screen, the writers, directors, and cast went for it, for good and for bad. The results weren't always perfect, but there was never any doubt that these characters, and this world, belonged in the movies.

Sadly, I can't really say the same for the *TNG* cast, and it wasn't until watching *Insurrection* that I finally realized why. This isn't any great discovery on my part, but it's a question that's nagged at me for years. For a while, I blamed the actors; Patrick Stewart is tremendous (although I never realized *how* tremendous until I watched this whole series), but Spiner, Frakes, and the rest of them? Pfft. A bunch of bland, charisma-vacuums. Now, having re-watched the movies and seen the series at its best and its worst, I admit I was off-base. Stewart is great, Spiner can be amazing when given the right direction, and everyone else in the cast is personable and charming, and really, that's all you need for a movie with an ensemble this deep. It's not like the original *Trek* was neck deep in Oliviers. Both shows were cast with professionals, and the only real difference between those professionals is that some of them could rise above bad material, and some of them couldn't. But even with that distinction, I think the *TNG* cast comes out ahead. They'd almost have to; where *TOS* only had three seasons to expand from (and most of those three

seasons were spent focused on Kirk, Spock, and McCoy), *TNG* was around for seven, and thought not every episode was perfect, there's enough material there to give us a good sense of everyone on that bridge.

So it's not the cast's fault. But whose fault is it? Because this isn't just a string of bad luck; there's an underlying philosophy behind all four *TNG* movies that dooms them to, at best, forgettable entertainment, an approach that effectively neuters the strengths of the source material. *Insurrection* isn't the worst movie I've ever seen. Most people who've seen it probably don't have any strong opinion about it one way or the other. At just over an hour and forty minutes, it's the shortest *Trek* movie ever made, and it's also, I think, the most forgettable. It's competently directed—nobody does competently directed like my man Frakes (and lest you think I'm dismissing him, his work both on screen and off is one of the reasons this goes down so easily)—and it's the only *TNG* movie that gives Picard a love interest. That's basically it. If you knew nothing about *Trek*, and happened to catch this on TBS one Sunday afternoon, well, it wouldn't change your life, but you wouldn't weep blood or anything.

I kind of hate this movie, though, because I'm a *TNG* fan, and you have to be a *TNG* fan to get why all of this is so very wrong. Partly, it's the premise: there's a magical planet that makes everyone on it immortal. And not just immortal; anyone who stays there for any length of time also de-ages until they hit their point of greatest physical maturity, and then just sort of stays there. Forever. It cures wounds and illnesses (Geordi's eyes are fixed), passions are re-ignited (Riker and Troi hook up again), and Worf goes through puberty again. I give that one its own category because it is stupid. Everyone else gets to be all excited and young and bad-ass; Worf gets a big zit, which is a crap joke, and also makes no sense. Why is he going through puberty again? The whole point of *The Eternals' End Catalog Planet* is that the inhabitants regress to their most perfect age. Nobody else is suffering from bad skin or "aggressive tendencies." But hey, why miss a chance to make fun of the Klingon?

Sorry, I got distracted there. Anyway, given its life-giving properties, it's not surprising that ELECP has attracted some attention. Notably, it's attracted the attention of the Son'a, who are determined to leech the magical radiation out of the planet's rings, and use it for their own fell purposes. They've got some help from Starfleet on this, because let's face it, the curative potential of that radiation, if properly harnessed, could save millions of lives. Unfortunately, getting the radiation out of the rings means rendering the planet below uninhabitable. But it's cool; while the Federation at large doesn't know what's going on, the head of the Son'a, Ahdar Ru'afo (F. Murray Abraham, who you should never trust, since he killed Mozart) is working with Admiral Dougherty (Anthony Zerbe) to transport the locals off the planet without them realizing it. Before they can pull off this trick (undoubtedly stolen from the *Enterprise's* logs), Data discovers the holoship Ru'afo intends to use to spirit the Ba'ku away. He gets shot, the injury throws off his positronic net, and the movie starts with him intentionally revealing himself to the native population, who didn't realize they were being observed, and then destroying the shield that keeps the Son'a/Federation outpost on the planet invisible.

That's when Picard and the others are called in, and that's how we get the meat, so to speak, of the plot. Once Picard discovers what's happening, he's pissed, and he and the rest of the crew take up arms in defence of the Ba'ku, who all turn out to be incredibly advanced but disdain from using technology because ick and gross and "We're too evolved for that." So that gives us our title, because clearly, our heroes are engaging in a kind of insurrection, except given the fact that no one at Star Fleet really knows what's going on, and also given the fact that one of the movie's big sub-plots has Ru'afo sending ships after Riker and the *Enterprise* to stop them from getting the truth out, I'm not sure who is supposed to be insurrecting whom. As far as I can tell, only two people die in the whole movie, and they're both baddies (well, one of them's a baddie, the other one is "morally compromised"), so that's not all that exciting. The logic behind why Picard and the others make their stand is a little fuzzy as well. As Dougherty himself points out, the Ba'ku aren't native to the planet; they stumbled across the life-sustaining power of the rings while fleeing from their own civil wars, and while it's great they spent the centuries since then getting really, really good at quilt making, their "right" to immortality isn't anymore sacred than anyone else's. Picard does some speechifying

about moral imperatives, and he's apparently still guilty over all that Indian moving, but the issue is complicated enough that it deserved more discussion than a few shouted lines.

So that's one reason all of this is so disposable: there are ideas here, but none of the interesting ones are explored, and instead, we get a lot of broadly familiar adventure movie beats. Picard is attracted to Anij (Donna Murphy), a woman of the Ba'ku, and there's briefly a concern she might die, even though you know she won't. Data bonds with a boy about learning how to "play" and so forth. Ro'afu is a sneering, whiny bastard, right up until the stunning reveal when we learn that the Son'a are really just Ba'ku who were exiled from the ELECP years ago and are now back for revenge, after which Ro'afu becomes a sneering, whiny, semi-justified bastard. It's generic, right down to Dougherty getting his comeuppance for collaborating with a psychopath via one of the Son'a's face-stretchers. Much of the middle half of the movie is dominated by Picard and the others moving the Ba'ku across country, which doesn't sound exciting, and isn't. Oh, they have to battle occasional influxes of transporter tagging drones, but there's no urgency to the fight. Anyone who gets hit by a tag is beamed onto Ro'afu's ship. And since we already know that Ro'afu is bound to be defeated sooner or later, it's hard to get too worked up over what amounts to little more than a temporary inconvenience.

It's all very perfunctory, but "perfunctory" doesn't quite get to the real problems here. Like the fact that the Ba'ku are, by and large, smug creeps. Even if you're unfamiliar with *TNG*, I can't imagine missing the arrogance Anij and Sojef (Daniel Hugh Kelly) display. It's not just that they've had hundreds of years to develop an "incredible mental discipline" (as Troi calls it), they're also dismissive and condescending to strangers, and to the idea of any world beyond their own. If this is the final result of all of *Trek's* grand dreams of Utopia, it's a shoddy place indeed. (It's also painfully monochromatic.) And yet the Ba'ku's apparently remarkable insight and dignity are referenced throughout the film. *Insurrection* isn't just making the argument that the rights of indigenous (ish) people should be protected; it wants us to believe that the Ba'ku *deserve* to be protected, because they've somehow found the ideal way of living, and that means they've earned the right to immortality.

It's a strange argument to make, and it's never particularly believable. The Ba'ku might have something to offer the universe at large (their hacky-sack skills, at the very least, are impressive), but they have no intention of offering it. Anij invites Picard to stay with her at the movie and he turns her down, but he does mention he'll be back for a visit to use up some of his massive backlog of shore leave. It's very cute, but if Picard is going to come back, does that mean the rest of the *Enterprise* crew has a permanent invite as well? They did, after all, risk their lives for the Ba'ku. So sure, let them come back, it would be rude not to, but what if they want to bring family and friends? What if their friends tell more friends? What happens when the cruisers start hitting orbit, not to steal power or murder anyone, but just to snag some property in what is destined to be the number one prime real estate location in the universe?

The Ba'ku's precious privacy is a lost cause from the moment anyone leaves their planet alive, but no one acknowledges this. The ending is resoundingly triumphant, and that, ultimately, is why this movie doesn't work, and why all the *TNG* movies fail to varying degrees: they have no interest in being smart. *TNG*, at its best, was a *smart* show. It told complicated stories about heroes who had to make difficult choices, and it found the drama in recognizing that good men (and women) face no win situations every day. These are qualities that can be difficult to translate from the small screen to the large, and I recognize that, but I would've infinitely preferred a movie that at least tried for complexity and failed, to the generic Mad-Lib actioners we got. The reason why the *TNG* movies don't work is that none of them are representative of the show they're trying to adapt. Instead, we get Picard, Data, Riker, Geordi, Beverly, Worf, and Troi shoe-horned into *TOS* style movies, full of broad plots, attempts at crowd-pleasing that offer little respect or understanding of the characters, and the same tedious arc again and again. All four *TNG* movies end with Picard physically fighting a bad guy. You can't even say the same for the *TOS* films (the greatest of which doesn't even have the hero and the villain in the same *room*). This is a man who lived a lifetime,

has been one with his worst enemy, has traveled to his past and his future, has dealt with thousands of species and successfully stared down an omnipotent being time and again. He doesn't need to go Bruce Willis against anybody. We already know he's awesome.

There's more here, like the way the Ba'ku's isolationist status is at odds with Picard's explorer's soul in a way that's never really discussed, or that awful joke about boobs (Data's reduction to comic relief in the movies is flat out awful, and Spiner's performances keep on getting broader just to keep up, but this is such a minor, trifling chunk of celluloid that I can't see wasting more words on it than I already have. In the interest of fairness, I will say I enjoyed the space battle, corny as it was, and it was sweet to see Riker and Troi get back together again. The two are natural and charming together, and their chemistry has a nice, lived-in feel. It's one of the only moments in any of the franchise films that fits in easily with the television series, which tells you all you need to know about the movies.

Stray observations:

- What's up with all the apostrophes?

Saturday, December 17th: The AV Club presents a live chat of *Star Trek: Nemesis*, starting at 7pm EST. The chat page should go up in the *TNG* section of the TV Club sometime in the next couple of days. Come by, get loaded, and revel in the bitterness of *TNG*'s final failed attempt at big screen success.

Thursday, December 22nd: We finish *Star Trek: The Next Generation* with its two part finale, "All Good Things..."

Star Trek: Nemesis



by [Zack Handlen](#) and [Rowan Kaiser](#) December 17, 2011

Join us at 7 p.m. Eastern/4 p.m. Pacific for a live-chat of *Star Trek: Nemesis* movie. Bring your "Data Lives!" bumper stickers.

[Star Trek: The Next Generation: “All Good Things...”](#)



[Zack Handlen](#)

[12/22/11 10:00AM](#)

“All Good Things...” (season 7, episode 25; original aired 5/23/1994)

Or The One Where We Come To The End

The truth is, most television shows die hard. Unlike film or literature, a television show is a narrative which is started without a definitive conclusion in mind. The continuation of their main narrative is dependent on the whims of the public, and the commitment of the creative and financial team which keeps the series going. There are exceptions, of course, and it’s getting more common now for shows to announce their own end-date ahead of time, to allow for greater closure (and ratings), but this is still a rarity. With most shows we watch, the odds of getting a satisfying ending, one that works as an episode of television and manages to tie up narrative loose ends in a compelling way, is slim to none. The longer a series airs, the more the audience investment grows, and the more difficult it becomes to maintain the expected level of quality. The central cast becomes more expensive; performances go from nuanced to caricature-based; characters are cheapened by writing that’s quickly running out of ideas; plots are more and more likely to be tedious reheats of older classics. This is just as true about cult shows as it is about any other—more true, in fact, as I doubt the fans of [NCIS](#) are going to have their hearts broken any time soon. But [Community](#)? [Fringe](#)? Even a [Mad Men](#) or a [Breaking Bad](#) is not immune to gravity, because let’s face it, the better the show, the trickier the high wire act of making entertaining television becomes. We grouse about imperfections. Some of us are paid to do so. But the simple fact of the matter is, great television should be nearly impossible, and the longer it goes on, the longer the fall back to reality.

By these standards, the success of “All Good Things...” is a minor miracle. It’s not a perfect episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and it’s not the best episode the show ever produced; if this double-sized entry had shown up earlier in the season, or during some other year of the show, I’d probably still enjoy it, but it wouldn’t have meant as

much as it does, for obvious reasons. In all honesty, judged as an episode and not a finale, this is sitting on the B+/A-line. It's more towards the A-, but the science fiction McGuffin that drives most of the action doesn't quite work, and while the final scenes are strong, the various thematic implications they attempt to pull together aren't as fully realized as they should be. But "All Good Things..." isn't just another episode of *TNG*. It's the finale, the last ever, the concluding onscreen voyage of Captain Jean-Luc Picard's *Enterprise*, unless you count the movies, and, if my review schedule didn't already make this obvious, I don't. As endings go, I've seen worse. I've seen better, sure, but that's nothing for *TNG* to be ashamed about, and considering the limitations of the show, and the largely fumbling seventh season, this is better than I, or anyone, could have hoped for. Like I said, minor miracles. As a reviewer, I can criticize, but as a fan, well, it's a little dusty in here, isn't it? Shut up, it's just something in my eye.

Of course, it isn't enough. How could it be? I wanted more Riker, more Worf, more Data, more Beverly, more Geordi, more Troi. And more Picard, even though "All Good Things..." is all about Picard, in the same way so many great hours of the show have been. After two months of struggling to find new ways of saying, "This isn't very good, really," and getting more and more excited about finally finding my way to the end of a project that has taken up so much of my time and effort, I got to that last poker game, and Picard's casual final line (so perfect, and so beautifully un-stressed; the significance is to us, not the characters), and all I wanted was 10 more minutes. Five, even. I'd take a stupid Data joke, or Troi talking about "sensing" something, or Worf being mocked, or, ugh, Lwaxana freakin' Troi—anything, for it not to be over. Not quite yet. Because when you live with a show this long, it becomes something more than a bunch of actors standing around spewing techno-babble. Relationships deepen, affections grow stronger, and even the slightest gesture takes on greater significance. This is what television shows have that no other medium can truly replicate: time. No book or movie, however long, can wear down our defenses through sheer attrition, setting its hooks, and becoming a part of our lives without us ever realizing it. Sure, we're all adults, and we understand the distinction between fiction and reality because most of us (fingers crossed) are still on our meds. But with great art, emotions don't really distinguish between reality and fiction. It's all affecting, and it all matters, and even though I never thought I'd give Picard a call or go drinking with Riker, saying goodbye to these people isn't a meaningless gesture. Stories are intangible objects, but they have weight, and they leave a hole in their absence.

"All Good Things..." works in part because writers Brannon Braga and Ron Moore don't oversell its significance. Yes, it's a double-sized episode, and yes, we have a couple of special guest stars in the form of John de Lancie's Q and Denise Crosby as pre-dead Tasha Yar. Yes, there's time travel, and yes, the fate of the whole human race is at stake. But while we see Picard dealing with a potential future and his past alongside his present, and while there are occasional references to the show closing its doors, the finale never becomes overly consciousness of its own importance. The ensemble gets to shine, but it's not a conspicuous shine, and we don't waste a lot of time on big speeches or game-changing emotional confessions. This makes sense, as for all its drama and occasional mind-bending crises, *TNG* is, at heart, a low-key show. Well, maybe not exactly "low-key," but barring Tasha's death in season one, the paradigm shifts have been more by implication. There are plenty of drawbacks to low-key serialization, but its strength plays into one of the key reason television has become so important in people's lives: it creates a comforting continuity, a place you can always come back to when you need to escape. *TNG* is people doing a job they love, and getting through the day. They have strong principles, and ideals they'd give their lives for, but this isn't a universe that regularly requires such a sacrifice.

It makes sense, then, for all its devastating possibilities, that "All Good Things..." doesn't do much to change the established status quo. Part of this is undoubtedly because of the movies; *Star Trek: Generations* was being filmed when the show ended, and that limited the degree of shake-up the writers could pull. That doesn't make it any less fitting, though, and any finale that didn't end with the crew of the *Enterprise* hanging out and getting ready to go on another adventure would, I think, have been a lie. Here's what happens in the episode: Picard becomes unstuck in

time. He travels through three distinct periods, the show's present, the past, and the future. In the past, he's just coming on board the *Enterprise* to take command of the ship, alongside Tasha Yar and a not-quite-complete crew. In the future, he's an old man with a vineyard, alone, who only gets visits from friends when he's diagnosed with a fatal disease. At first, he doesn't know why he's jumping around, and, since he can't retain his memories and no one notices the transition, he isn't even sure anything is happening. But it goes on, and the memories get easier to hold on to, and he realizes there's a problem in the Devron System, just inside the Neutral Zone. Something has created a temporal anomaly, and it's getting larger; worse, it's getting larger as it goes backwards through time. Even before Q shows up to belittle him, Jean-Luc realizes this can't be good.

Let's get the elephant out of the room right off, shall we? Yes, it's a fairly large plot hole that Future Picard is able to see, and ultimately interact (via Admiral Riker's *Enterprise*) with the anomaly. Supposedly, the anomaly was created when three different ships hit the same area of space with a tachyon beam, and it began with future Picard; since Future Picard doesn't realize what's happened until after the anomaly was created, and since the anomaly, being made of anti-time, is moving backwards, there shouldn't be anything to see when Admiral Riker brings his *Enterprise* back to the Devron System. But because he needs to see something in order for the episode to work, to give us the great climax of all three *Enterprises* sacrificing themselves to save humanity, I'm willing to let it slide. (There's also the fact that the episode states that the anomaly was created by all three *Enterprises* firing the tachyon pulse at once, but it was actually Captain Beverly Picard's ill-fated *USS Pasteur* which fired the initial beam in the future.) More problematic is the somewhat underwhelming nature of the finale's central mystery. It's fine, but it's no more than fine, and given the ambition of so much of the rest of the episode, the reliance on tech-babble for the solution is a little disappointing. The fact that Picard causes all of this because he's traveling in time is odd as well; Q indicates that this is a test by the Continuum, which works passably well as justification, but plot and character don't gel as powerfully here as they did on the series' best hours.

Thankfully, if the plot isn't great, the execution is. As mentioned, the finale, with all three ships destroying themselves one after the other is thrilling, and the episode moves at a good clip throughout; for the first time in ages, we have a two-part episode that never feels overly padded or self-indulgent. (It also never feels like a two-part episode, since it was designed to be shown as a single unit.) Each separate time period has a distinct, easily recognizable vibe, even when characters are standing on the same sets in both, and it's impressive how ably Patrick Stewart manages to shift his performance between each of the three Picards. The change is more obvious in Future Picard, a old man made bitter by years of obsolescence and loneliness, but even Past Picard is distinct, the somewhat cold, distant leader the character was at the start of the show. As for the other characters, the future comes off the clearest, and also the most depressing, a not-completely awful place which is nonetheless disappointing. Yay, Picard and Beverly got married! Boo, they're divorced. Yay, Data is a professor at Cambridge! Boo, he's turned into kind of a dick. (I can't decide if this is a subtle reference to the emotions chip or just more evidence that the future kind of blows.) Yay, Worf and Riker have risen in power! Boo, they're estranged, and even worse, they're estranged because Troi is dead. In "All Good Things..." tomorrow is a lonely place, and while the ending of the episode strongly implies that this future is avoidable, it's still bracing to see Future Picard ranting like a lunatic while his former shipmates look on in discomfort.

The return of Q is the best choice the writers make, especially as this is a return of the slightly-scary, threatening Q of the earlier part of the show's run. "Things" doesn't overuse him, either building to his first appearance by making Picard aware of his involvement before even we are. (I guess if you were really clever, you might notice that the people who keep taunting future Picard were the peasants from the trial scene in ["Encounter At Farpoint."](#)) Q gets some of the best lines in the episode, and he and Picard play off each other as beautifully as they always do. Better, his involvement in the finale goes a long way towards justifying the plot. Everything Picard goes through is the latest stage in humanity's on-going trial, and it's all designed to force him to think of time differently than the way

we foolish mortals so often do; not as a line, in which events proceed in orderly fashion one after the other, but as a great, well, tapestry, in which every moment of our lives and every moment of everyone else's life informs everything. Nothing exists in isolation; everyone matters. It's a fascinating idea, one worthy of a show that's spent so many years building its ensemble and working to create a universe in which each different species come together and fight and struggle towards common understanding. Exploration doesn't end at space, just as human progress didn't end at the night sky. There will always be new frontiers. At one point, Q takes Picard back to the very beginning of life on Earth, and it's such a staggering, wonderful moment, to think of how far we've come, and how far we can go. There's a nagging part of my brain that doesn't think the actual storyline quite lives up to this, but I'm just going to hum loudly until he shuts up.

It all ends with a poker game, as is only fair. Out of every scene in the episode, Picard's final conversation with Q, and the poker game, are my favorite. The chat with Q sets up the possibilities, opening the door to the next step, but, well, it's a little scary out there. The stairs are steep, the air is thin, and the way is dark. There is a time for boldness, for stepping through the door and fighting your way up higher and farther, but there's also a time when you need to come home. That's all the poker game is, really. There's no amazing twist, no heartbreaking revelations. There are just friends. Picard finally decides to sit in, and in a way, it's almost like the entire episode has been building to this moment, all the drama and the danger and the crisis contrived to get Picard ready to take his seat with Riker, Troi, Beverly, Geordi, Worf, and Data, and deal out the next hand. Yes, the future is bright and there are so many places we may go tomorrow. But today is for the people we love and the lives we share with them. With this crew by our side, anything is possible. With a good ship and better company, the sky's the limit.

Stray Observations:

- Thank you. I feel fortunate to have gotten the opportunity to write these reviews, and even more fortunate for the engaged, creative, and frequently hilarious commenters. I'm going to follow the finale's lead and not get too sentimental here, but it's been a pleasure working for and with you all, and I hope to see you sometime early next year for *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*.